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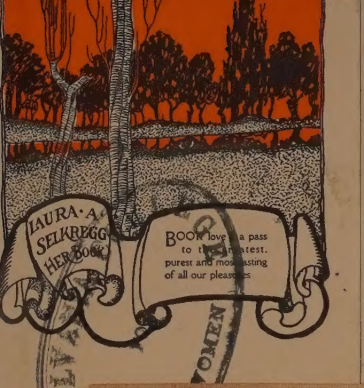
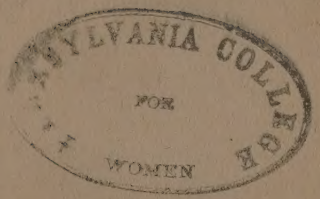
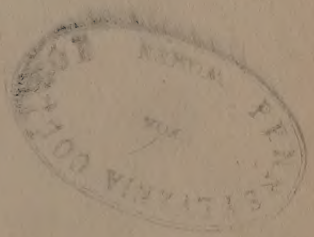

LAURA·A·
SELKREGG
HER BOOK
BOOK-lovers a pass
to the greatest,
purest and most lasting
of all our pleasures

"I confess I was awfully young when I wrote it"
(See p. 78)
John van Druten.



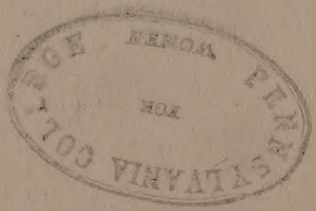
YOUNG
WOODLEY



Perry Hall House
Collection

A PLAY IN THREE ACTS
BY JOHN VAN DRUTEN

Young Woodley



NEW YORK MCMXXVI
SIMON AND SCHUSTER

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V28

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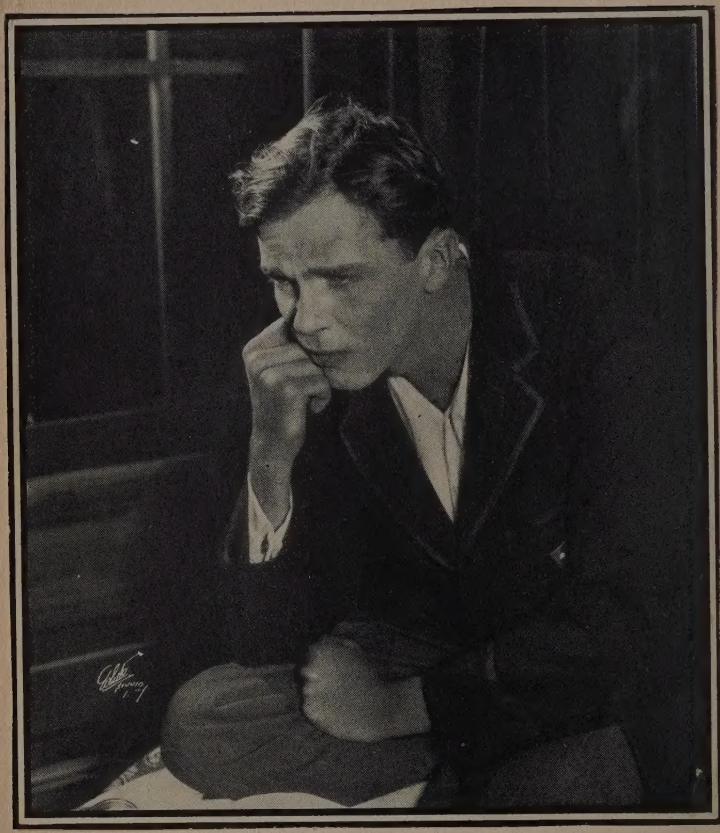
YOUNG
WOODLEY

Miss Bolknap 1332



CHARACTERS AND ORIGINAL CAST

(*In order of appearance*)

Cope	House Prefects	George Walcott
Vining		Geoffrey John Harwood
Ainger		Edward Crandall
Milner		John Gerard
Woodley		Glenn Hunter
Laura Simmons		Helen Gahagan
Simmons	Housemaster	Herbert Bunston
Parlourmaid		Willa Frederic
Mr. Woodley		Grant Stewart

SCENES

Act One: The Prefects' Room in the Tree House, Mallowhurst.

Act Two: Mrs. Simmons' drawing-room in the same. Three weeks later.

Act Three: Scene One
Same as Act One. . . . Two days later.

Scene Two
Same as Act Two. . . . The following afternoon.

ACT ONE

SCENE:—*The Prefects' Room in the Tree House, Mallowhurst.*

TIME:—*About five o'clock on a May afternoon.*

A large bright room, with windows in the R. wall looking onto a distant view of the playing fields. Below the windows, an impromptu window seat made out of cushions, cretonne and packing cases. The door is in the back wall R., between it and the left a large wooden settee littered with motor papers, magazines, books, etc. Fireplace L.C. with an easy chair facing it, and another above it facing the audience. A large cupboard left of the back wall. A large table, on which the remains of a tea are spread, fills the right half of the stage. Three chairs above it and on each side. The table faces longwise to the audience. Other chairs against the walls; a Decca gramophone and a pile of records in corner L. on small table. The walls are hung with Cricket and Rugby groups, Harrison Fishers and Kirchners. The room is strewn with books, blazers, cricket boots, bats and other impediments.

When the curtain rises, COPE, *a small fag of about fourteen is clearing away the tea things. He sticks*

his finger in jam pot, licks it and then tears piece off the loaf, puts that in the jam and then eats that. He piles dirty crockery on tray; puts cake, loaf, butter, etc., into the cupboard. A clock on the mantelpiece strikes five. He looks at it agitatedly. The door opens, AINGER, VINING *and* MILNER *come in.* VINING *and* MILNER *are about eighteen,* AINGER *is nearing nineteen, good-looking and athletic.* VINING *is rather coarse and too well dressed.* MILNER *pleasant and agreeable.* AINGER *takes the armchair facing the audience.* VINING *stands before the empty grate.* MILNER *goes over to window seat.*

VINING

Well, Cope, not done yet? What sort of a fag do you call yourself?

COPE

Please, Vining, may I leave the washing up till later?

VINING

No, you may not. Why the devil should you?

COPE

You see, Vining, it's gone five and I've got to report to Plunkett.

VINING

That's not my fault, you should have come in earlier.

COPE

I couldn't, Vining. . . . Simmy kept me and . . .

VINING

Who kept you?

COPE

Simmy and . . .

VINING

Mr. Simmons to you, Cope, don't be disrespectful to your housemaster.

COPE

I'm sorry, Vining, but he kept me. I couldn't help it. I'd got all my fractions wrong and . . .

VINING

Well, get ahead with it now and hurry, we want the place clear.

COPE

But Plunkett has got me down in Task Book.

AINGER

Oh, give the kid a chance, Vining, it's poor fun fagging anyway.

VINING

My son, if you will be a beastly little slacker and get yourself put into Task Book it's no fault of ours.

COPE

But, Vining, I . . .

VINING

Shut up and get on with it. [*Pretends to hit him.*]

AINGER

Oh, leave the washing up, kid . . . shove the things into the cupboard out of the way and cut along. . . .

COPE

Thank you, Ainger.

VINING

And don't you think it would be a good idea if you were to wash yourself before coming in here to clear away. You're bathed in ink.

COPE

I'm sorry, Vining, but Willis put the pumice-stone down my back.

MILNER

Why don't you use a fountain pen?

COPE

I do, Milner. I got it for a shilling at Crawley's, only it leaks awfully and the nib's crossed.

VINING

I hope you were duly impressed with the head's awful words this morning in Assembly, Cope? I trust you will profit by them and always keep yourself "pure in thought, word and deed."

COPE

I didn't understand what he was talking about, Vining.

VINING

That's as it should be, Cope. I'm glad to see that you're still unspotted from the world.

COPE

What has Riley done?

VINING

Little boys mustn't ask questions.

MILNER

It's something you'll understand when you're older, Cope.

VINING

And perhaps if you are a good boy I'll tell you some day.

COPE

West said he knew but he wouldn't tell me. He told me to ask Simmons.

[*A loud guffaw from all three.*]

VINING

That's right, Cope, you ask Simmons, or Mrs. Simmy . . . why don't you ask her . . . I'm sure she'd tell you.

AINGER

Shut up, Vining. . . . You cut along to Task Book, Cope, and tell Plunkett I kept you.

COPE

[*Interested.*] Won't you tell me what it was?

VINING

Another day, Cope. You come to me and I'll tell you.

AINGER

Chuck it, Vining. You'll know in time, Cope. Get along now.

VINING

And remember, Cope . . . "pure in thought, word and deed."

[COPE *goes.*]

AINGER

Leave the kid alone, Vining. He's still in the gooseberry bush stage. [*Rises, goes up and gets note paper and book. Sits and writes.*]

VINING

Time he came out of it then. Lord, I hope he asks Simmons.

MILNER

It would be a joke. I remember when I was a kid asking a master at my Prep school how I was born. It was in the physiology Class. A lot of older chaps egged me on to it and I didn't know what I was doing. I was only about ten at the time and frightfully green.

VINING

What did the old boy do?

MILNER

Oh, turned pink about the gills, stammered and gurgled and referred me to my mater.

VINING

And she . . . ?

MILNER

Oh, she trotted out the usual natural history poppycock. Lord, I'd like to see Simmy's face when Cope asks him.

VINING

[*Rises.*] What a damned fool game that pi-jaw was he gave us this afternoon. We, as Prefects, responsible for the moral tone of the house. Well, Ainger, you're house captain, will you organize the force for the pro-

tection of public morals. Are you going to make me your A. D. C? [*Salutes.*]

AINGER

If you were to take your position as Prefect a little more seriously, Vining, it wouldn't do you any harm.

VINING

[*Crosses to fireplace.*] Oh, listen to the bloke . . . getting all official. By the way, where's young Woodley? What's he got to say about it all? You know, I think that kid's still pretty innocent about most things; altho' he pretends not to be.

AINGER

No, he's not innocent, he's only reticent.

VINING

Reticent be——

AINGER

Well, shy then.

VINING

Rot!

MILNER

You know, I don't quite get young Woodley. Look at the lurid poetry he's always writing. That thing that just got into the Mag. Struck me as pretty go-ahead for a pure Public School. How did it go . . .

something about dark-eyed maidens, supple limbed . . . supple limbed! Not half! I don't see how you make him out to be innocent, Vining. I think he's a dark horse, myself.

VINING

Oh, that doesn't mean anything. He was probably thinking of an athletic aunt on the tennis courts.

[ROGER WOODLEY *comes in. He is a shy, fair boy of between seventeen and eighteen.*]

Hello, you passion flower, we were just talking about you.

WOODLEY

Oh?

AINGER

What's up?

WOODLEY

Nothing. Simmy again, that's all.

AINGER

What's the trouble now?

WOODLEY

I don't know. Trying to be funny, as usual. That man doesn't like me.

VINING

What, not like little Woodley? Our baby Prefect?

WOODLEY

Shut up.

VINING

Oh, you're mistaken, Woodley, he loves you. How can you doubt it. After all he was saying about purity too. If you're not his ideal of the pale, pink, pure young schoolboy with your infant Samuel face I'd like to know who is.

WOODLEY

Chuck it, Vining.

AINGER

What has Simmy been saying now?

WOODLEY

Oh, disapproving of me generally. My writings again. That poem in the Mag. unhealthy. Why do I waste my time scribbling when I ought to be garnering the precious hours of youth to cultivate my mind. That sort of thing.

VINING

Well, I don't see why he should kick up such a fuss about a poem that couldn't have taken you more than a quarter of an hour.

WOODLEY

Oh, so you think it only took me a quarter of an hour?

VINING

Well, you'd have been a fool if you'd spent any more time on it. But it's all the same to Simmy. Interfer-

ence all along the line. And now this purity campaign of his. Why, a little affair like this of Riley's is enough to start him off for a whole term.

WOODLEY

Simmy's purity campaign makes me vomit. Not that I hold any brief for Riley, whatever he may have done . . . dirty little beast that he is.

VINING

Whatever he may have done.

WOODLEY

Well, the head wasn't exactly explicit, was he, with all his biblical metaphors. I gather it was one of the housemaids in Plunketts.

VINING

Yes, the dark haired one. Doesn't say much for Riley's taste. Still beggars can't be choosers. Plunkett caught them in the pantry. *Flagrante delicto* . . . so to speak.

WOODLEY

How nice for Plunkett.

VINING

[*Rises.*] What rot it is sacking a man for that.

WOODLEY

I don't see it.

VINING

Hell, yes. Ruining a chap's whole life just for the sake of discipline.

MILNER

What do you mean?

VINING

Why, his pater's on the Army Council. Deuce of a swell. Riley was going into cavalry. He can't go now. His whole career absolutely bust.

AINGER

Serves him right. It'll do the rest of the school good anyway.

VINING

What do they think we are . . . Celibate monks? Good Lord, it's human nature, isn't it? I was over in France last year; met a lot of French fellows. Things are pretty different over there I can tell you. Why, practically every boy has got his *petite amie* and the thing is recognised and generally known. If you try to stop it it only leads to something worse.

AINGER

Rot. We're not all like you, Vining.

VINING

'Tisn't rot; it's the same thing in girls' schools if there are any men about the place, I could tell you a few tales that would open your eyes. I wouldn't mind being

boot boy in a girls' school for a bit . . . and as for those co-education places. My hat!

WOODLEY

I don't believe it.

VINING

Bilge! Why not? You can't get away from human nature. That's all Simmy's purity campaign means. Suppress your natural instincts. Huh, and Simmy is a nice one to talk anyway.

MILNER

What do you mean? Simmy's married.

VINING

I know he is. Jolly pretty woman she is too. A damned sight too good for old Simmy. But he's only been married two years and I was here before that . . . so were you, Milner. What about that parlour maid of theirs. Nice piece. Nice piece. I'll bet she could tell a thing or two. High jinks she and Simmy used to have I'll warrant.

AINGER

[*Finishes letter.*] Oh, shut up, Vining. You make me sick.

VINING

What do you suppose they choose all the school servants so old and ugly for, then. Gor', look at them.

You couldn't find a lot like that anywhere in a day's march.

WOODLEY

Oh, drop it, Vining. Ainger's quite right. You have got a filthy mind.

VINING

This is a bit of a sudden conversion for you, isn't it, Ainger. I can remember some of the tales you've told.

AINGER

There's a damned sight too much of this sort of talk in the school and I'm going to drop on it all I can.

VINING

Well, you can leave me out of your prayer meetings if you don't mind. Here, Milner, who's that kid peeping in? [*Crosses to window.*]

MILNER

[*Out of window.*] Here . . . you . . . what do you mean by it? 'Strewth, it's Cope!

VINING

[*Up to door center.*] Cope, is it?

MILNER

[*Out of window.*] Cope!

COPE

[*Off.*] Yes, Milner.

MILNER

What are you doing there?

COPE

Please, Milner . . .

VINING

Come inside . . . we want you.

MILNER

Cope, your presence is urgently desired. . . . Scrimshanking the little tic. That's all you get for your leniency, Ainger.

WOODLEY

What's up?

MILNER

Ainger let him off washing up because he said he was in T.B.

[*A knock on the door.*]

VINING

Entray, Mossoo.

[COPE *comes in frightened.*]

AINGER

[*Rises licking envelope.*] Well, young man. What have you got to say for yourself? Why aren't you in T.B.?

COPE

Please, Ainger, Ratty forgot to put my name down. It wasn't on the list when I got there.

MILNER

He never put you in at all.

COPE

Yes, Milner, he did. Honestly. He said he was going to because I hadn't prepared my Livy. Second hour this morning . . . you ask anyone in D. Latin. Honour bright, Milner.

MILNER

Then why didn't you come back and finish your washing up, you lazy little swob? [*Kicks him.*]

VINING

[*Taking* COPE *by the ear.*] And what do you mean by looking in at the window? Don't you know it's forbidden? Wanted to hear what we were saying, eh?

COPE

No, Vining, I . . .

VINING

Well as you must have made all arrangements for detention this afternoon, it seems a pity to disappoint you. So you had better come to Prefects Detention at five-thirty. See?

COPE

But why, Vining?

[AINGER *crosses to settee. Picks up motor paper. Drops letter on table. Back to fireplace.*]

VINING

Why . . . because I tell you to. For not being in Task Book, for looking in at the window, for arguing with me now and for being a lazy little slacker. And now get on with the washing up till half past and if you break anything I'll slay you.

[COPE *tearfully goes to cupboard.*]

MILNER

And for God's sake don't snivel.

WOODLEY

There's a box of peppermint creams on the second shelf. Second shelf, I said, you idiot.

[COPE *brings box of sweets.* VINING *gets velvet rag from under settee, polishes shoes.*]

MILNER

Chuck me one, Woodley.

[WOODLEY *does so.* AINGER *reaches out and takes one.*]

WOODLEY

Vining?

VINING

Peppermints? Lord no. Berr-fume removers. That's all they are good for.

WOODLEY

Don't swank.

VINING

[*To* COPE.] And what are you waiting for?

COPE

Nothing, Vining. [COPE *goes off.*]

MILNER

By the way, isn't it Sunday we've all got to tea with Simmy and his Missis?

VINING

Hell, yes. I hate these bun worries. Sitting round a drawing room doing balancing stunts and making polite conversation, with Simmy being sarcastic about nothing and airing his Oxford memories.

AINGER

I believe Mrs. Simmy hates them as much as we do. Do you know I'm sorry for that woman. She's awfully shy.

WOODLEY

Being married to Simmy can be no joke. I like Mrs. Simmy.

VINING

Besides it messes one's afternoon up so.

WOODLEY

What the hell is there to do on Sunday afternoon anyway?

VINING

I don't know, Woodley, whether your admiration for Mrs. Simmy has prevented you from noticing the blandishments of the young woman in Crawley's.

WOODLEY

Which one?

AINGER

Do you mean the red-haired one who always tries to fumble with your hand when she is giving you the change?

WOODLEY

What! Does she do that to you too?

VINING

Oh, my precious, did you think you were the only one?

WOODLEY

Well, what about her anyway?

VINING

Oh, nothing . . . only she's not averse to taking long walks on Sunday afternoons in the neighborhood of Mallow Woods.

WOODLEY

But Mallow Woods are out of bounds.

VINING

Exactly, my innocent . . . less likelihood of being found out.

WOODLEY

What . . . what do you mean?

VINING

Oh come now . . . you don't want me to be coarse, do you?

WOODLEY

You mean . . . you . . .

VINING

Exactly. And she has got a friend . . . works in

Cowle's the drapers. Nice girl . . . dark-eyed . . . supple-limbed. I'll introduce you if you like.

WOODLEY

I don't think so, thanks. [*Goes up to settee for history book.*]

VINING

Just as you like, of course.

AINGER

If I took you seriously, Vining . . .

VINING

You would report me to Simmy as victim number one of the purity campaign. Go ahead, then. . . . Here, I must go, I've got a hell of a lot of extra maths to get up. Think it over, Woodley. Any Sunday afternoon when there is nobody about. [*Exits.*]

[WOODLEY *goes to table.*]

MILNER

[*Rising.*] Old Vining knows a thing or two.

AINGER

I dare say. But it's nine tenths bluff and swank.

MILNER

I don't know so much. He's pretty hot stuff. His pater's rich you know. Vining's tinned meats. Lets him do as he likes. Gives him a latch-key and no ques-

tions asked. I wish mine did. Well, I'm going to change for Nets. Coming, Woodley?

WOODLEY

Not tonight. I'm swatting George I for Ratty.

MILNER

Ainger?

AINGER

No, I'm taking P.D. at half-past.

MILNER

Cheerio, then. [*Exits.*]

WOODLEY

I hate Vining.

AINGER

I know you do.

WOODLEY

Don't you?

AINGER

Hate? No, he's a type.

WOODLEY

A foul type. I say, Ainger, how much is there in it?

AINGER

In what?

WOODLEY

All his talk.

AINGER

More than I pretend to believe, I think.

WOODLEY

These shop girls . . . does he . . . really?

AINGER

I believe so.

WOODLEY

Why don't you do something?

AINGER

How can I? Tell tales to Simmy? You know I can't. Before he got made a prefect it was different, but he was damned careful then. The best I can do now is to pretend not to believe it.

WOODLEY

But you do all the same?

AINGER

I'm afraid so.

WOODLEY

But you don't approve of it? [*Opens books.*]

AINGER

No, I damn well don't. All the same there is something in what he says.

WOODLEY

[*Drops books.*] How d'you mean?

AINGER

Well, we are under a system here that treats us as not being mature until we leave, that is when we are eighteen or nineteen—nature matures us at fourteen. What about it?

WOODLEY

But you don't mean that everyone . . . ?

AINGER

Not everyone, no. It works different ways. But precious few of us escape it altogether—one way or another.

WOODLEY

[*Walking over to window.*] Well, I think it's beastly. Ainger, have you ever . . . ?

AINGER

No . . . but . . . well . . .

WOODLEY

[*Back to him.*] You've kissed girls?

AINGER

Of course.

WOODLEY

Have you ever been in love? Properly, I mean?

AINGER

Never.

WOODLEY

You don't believe in it?

AINGER

I never said so.

WOODLEY

Vining doesn't. He couldn't or he wouldn't go on as he does.

AINGER

The two things aren't the same, you know.

WOODLEY

[*On window seat.*] I wish I could get them straightened out.

AINGER

What's the matter, kid? [*No answer.*] Can't you tell me?

WOODLEY

[*Turning to him.*] Oh, it's all such a beastly mix-up.

AINGER

Why is it? Are you in love? Is that it?

WOODLEY

No. No, of course it's not that. Only I suppose I am different from other fellows, that's all.

AINGER

What do you mean?

WOODLEY

You won't laugh at me?

AINGER

What do you take me for?

[WOODLEY *comes back to his perch on the table. Fiddles with the box of sweets, not looking at* AINGER.]

WOODLEY

Well, one night in town last holidays I met Herpath . . . you remember, left last year? [AINGER *nods.*] He was at a loose end and he asked me to go and have dinner with him. So I did . . . up West somewhere . . . and then he took me to a place down Tottenham Court Road. A dancing place, the "Siren" it was called. I don't know I thought it was awful, but he seemed to like it. There were a whole lot of beastly looking men, awful swine, and . . . and . . . I hung about until, well . . . there were a lot of women there . . .

you know professionals, the real thing, and I felt such a damned fool sitting there doing nothing, and Herpath was dancing, so I asked one of them to dance. . . .

AINGER

Well?

WOODLEY

It was awful. I didn't know what to say to her and she made me feel sick. You know, painted up to the eyes and awfully cheap scene, and I felt quite . . . well . . . you know, almost frightened. And then we sat down and she drank whiskey and laughed at me, and I just couldn't talk to her. I couldn't think of anything to say. And I danced with another one too. She looked quite old and she smelt of drink. I suppose I could have gone home with her if I'd liked. I believe Herpath did with one of them . . . anyway I lost him.

AINGER

And did you?

WOODLEY

No. . . . I tell you I felt frightened. Well, it's damned silly, isn't it? I mean the way I've talked about these things, the way Vining does, and told smutty jokes and all that, and then when it comes to the point funking it like that.

AINGER

I shouldn't worry if I were you.

WOODLEY

And then there was a girl I met at home at a dance last year. Awfully pretty, you know . . . fair hair and dressed in pink. I danced with her twice and we were sitting out together, and I wanted to kiss her frightfully: but I simply hadn't got the pluck. I didn't know how to go about it. I felt I couldn't just catch hold of her and kiss her like that straight off the reel. I just sat there, saying nothing like a damned fool, till the next dance began. I could have kicked myself afterwards. I never saw her again. Bloody silly, isn't it. Then I go writing poetry that Vining and his sort make fun of where I imagine myself no end of a dog. At least, no, I don't mean that, but . . .

AINGER

I know.

WOODLEY

Well, why am I different from other people then?

AINGER

Do you want to be like Vining?

WOODLEY

Vining, no . . . but . . .

AINGER

I shouldn't say you were different from most people. I've felt like that too.

WOODLEY

You?

AINGER

Yes, often it is nothing to worry about.

WOODLEY

What a mix-up it all is. [*Crosses to window.*]

AINGER

Don't worry, kid. Take things as they come. How old are you, seventeen?

WOODLEY

I shall be eighteen in October.

AINGER

Well, you needn't say it as if you were eighty. You've plenty of time. We're most of us like that at first, unless we are Vining's sort.

WOODLEY

Yes, but what I feel is, all this sort of thing . . . shop-girls and housemaids . . . I simply couldn't do it. It would make me feel sick. And then you meet some-one, someone you like: someone of your own class. . . . I don't want to be snobbish; but you know what I mean. Someone you could be really keen on, and the thing's impossible. You can't think of them that way, at least I can't. I can't imagine them letting me. It's all wrong somehow. I suppose when people are really in love . . . I don't know, I don't understand that

either. I don't see how it all squares out. [*Has been moving about. Flops on window seat.*]

AINGER

[*Crosses to him, puts hand on shoulder.*] It's a brute, isn't it? I'm afraid I can't help you much. Things pan out more or less in the long run. One makes a few mistakes and does a few things one's sorry for. For the rest it's just a question of running straight as best you can. You don't want to get morbid about it any more than you want to wallow in it; but there is such a thing as a happy medium. [*Crosses R. sits in chair.*] As for "love," I believe a lot of it is imagination; or that it is something that is kept for a special favoured few. You think about it because you've read about it and seen it in plays and on the pictures. You're brought up to it. Your first fairy stories end with people marrying and living happily after. You come up against it in everything you read, and you imagine yourself doing the same thing. I wonder how many people ever strike it without being disappointed.

WOODLEY

I dare say you're right.

AINGER

I remember getting religion fearfully badly when I was about fifteen, wanted to go into the church and everything . . . had it properly. And then it faded away and I can see now that there never was anything

in it at all. I shouldn't be surprised if love isn't something like that.

WOODLEY

In the same way I've "got" poetry now.

AINGER

I'm sorry to be such a wet blanket about it.

WOODLEY

I expect you are right really. Though I can't believe it.

AINGER

How do you mean?

WOODLEY

Well, I can sort of see myself falling in love, only I suppose I'd be too shy when it came to the point.

AINGER

Well, there's lots of time. Besides, we are not all made the same way. I'm not romantic, that's all.

WOODLEY

You've been awfully decent, letting me talk like this. I'm no end grateful.

AINGER

Rot.

WOODLEY

'Tisn't rot, I mean it. I don't know why you put up with it.

AINGER

I happen to be rather fond of you, that's why. [*Knock.*] Come in.

WOODLEY

Oh, who the hell is that?

AINGER

Come in, I tell you. [*Still no answer. He goes to door. Opens it quickly. Laura Simmons is standing outside.*] Oh, Mrs. Simmons, I had no idea it was you. Please excuse me for shouting like that.

LAURA

It's quite all right.

AINGER

Do come in.

LAURA

Thank you. [*She comes in and crosses to chair by fire. She is a very pretty woman of twenty-eight, rather fragile, shy and retiring. She has a sweet voice and a slight air of mystery about her.*]

AINGER

Won't you sit down?

LAURA

Thanks. Good afternoon. [*This to* WOODLEY.]

WOODLEY

Good afternoon.

AINGER

Can I do something for you?

LAURA

Please. It is very irregular of me, I know, coming here like this. I wanted to see you and I happened to be walking past. It seemed so silly sending a formal note asking you to call.

AINGER

Of course. What is it?

LAURA

It is the shrubbery. The boys are using it as a short cut to the road, the lower school, I think. It is not that I object to that; but they are treating it so badly and simply ruining the beds at the end. I am rather fond of my flowers. I wonder if you could do anything. I did not want to bother my husband.

AINGER

Of course.

LAURA

I thought perhaps a word from you as captain . . . I don't want to make a serious house-master's matter of it.

AINGER

Of course, I'll see it's stopped at once.

LAURA

Thank you so much.

AINGER

You've not been in the Prefects' room before, I think, Mrs. Simmons. Do you like it?

LAURA

I've been here in the holidays when it's all bare and tidy. [*Looking round at the litter.*] It looks much more human now.

WOODLEY

I'm afraid it's in an awful mess.

LAURA

I hardly know the school buildings in term time. I'm afraid they frighten me a little. I feel terribly out of it all, with all the bustle and high spirits.

AINGER

You should be used to it by now.

LAURA

Yes, perhaps.

WOODLEY

We never see you at house-matches or anything.

LAURA

I know. It's terribly remiss of me I know. But I think I'm rather shy. My husband is always telling me of it.

WOODLEY

Oh, I didn't mean that. Please, it wasn't a reproach. Only . . .

LAURA

Only what?

WOODLEY

Well, only . . . a regret.

LAURA

Thank you. But I'm disturbing you.

WOODLEY

Not a bit, really. I am afraid I have nothing to offer you, except peppermint creams. Will you have one? [*Offers box.*]

LAURA

Thank you. [*Takes one. A knock at the door.* LAURA *starts.*]

AINGER

Who's there?

[*The door opens and* COPE *appears with tray of crockery; looking very woe-begone.*]

I had forgotten about you.

COPE

Yes, and please, Ainger . . .

AINGER

What?

COPE

I am afraid I have broken the tea-pot.

[*There is a long silence.* LAURA'S *presence is a constraint. She looks down at her lap. Then across at* WOODLEY. *She catches his eye and then smiles.*]

AINGER

Oh, well, shove the things into the cupboard and cut now. I'll see you later, after P.D. By the way, you're in already, aren't you?

COPE

Yes, Ainger.

AINGER

Well, I'm taking it. See me after.

[COPE *goes.*]

LAURA

Poor kid. What will you do to him for that. Thrash him?

AINGER

I suppose so.

LAURA

It seems a pity. But I suppose there is nothing else. Couldn't you stop his pocket money?

AINGER

I think he'd rather be thrashed.

LAURA

By the way, I feel terribly ignorant, but what is P.D.?

AINGER

Prefect's Detention. And I'm afraid I must be going to take it now.

LAURA

What do you make them do?

AINGER

Learn poetry by heart.

LAURA

What a terrible punishment.

AINGER

It is for most of them, I assure you.

WOODLEY

It never was for me. Rodney gave up putting me in because I learnt it so easily.

LAURA

I thought you made them write lines.

AINGER

Mr. Simmons forbade it. He says it spoils the handwriting. The poetry is his idea. It is a tradition of the house. I really must go. Good-bye.

LAURA

Good-bye. You are all coming to tea on Sunday, aren't you?

AINGER

Thanks, yes. We are looking forward to it.

LAURA

Are you? I imagined you hated it.

AINGER

What?

LAURA

I must not keep you. Good-bye.

[AINGER *exits.*]

If writing lines spoils the handwriting, doesn't learning poetry as a punishment kill your affection for verse?

WOODLEY

Most people haven't any to kill, Mrs. Simmons.

LAURA

I daresay that's true. Well, doesn't it prevent you ever developing one?

WOODLEY

Yes, I expect it does. I shall never know whether Gray's "Elegy" is a good poem. It always brings back P.D. to me. I can't separate it.

LAURA

And now you're a prefect you inflict it on others?

WOODLEY

I have to.

LAURA

Anyway it didn't kill your love for poetry.

WOODLEY

How do you know that?

LAURA

The school magazine. I read your verses. I liked them. I've wanted to tell you.

WOODLEY

Did you. I am awfully glad. Nobody much else did. I think the Editor only took them to fill up a corner. Poetry does, you know. He made me cut one verse because he hadn't room for it.

LAURA

Do you write much?

WOODLEY

A fair bit . . . odd times.

LAURA

Perhaps you might let me see some others, one day?

WOODLEY

Rather, if you'd like to. They are pretty rotten, though.

LAURA

Why do you say that? You don't mean it, you can't, or you wouldn't write them. You don't really think they are bad, do you?

WOODLEY

No, I suppose I don't.

LAURA

And you'll let me see them?

WOODLEY

Of course . . . that is . . .

LAURA

What? I won't show them to my husband, if that's what you're afraid of. I promise. But I'd like to see them.

WOODLEY

I've got them here if you'd care to take them now.

[WOODLEY *goes to cupboard, takes out an attaché case and unlocks it at table.*]

LAURA

Thanks, I would. You keep them locked up?

WOODLEY

Yes.

LAURA

Because they are such treasures, or for fear of prying eyes?

WOODLEY

Well, I don't want everyone to read them.

LAURA

Do they tease you . . . rag you, I should say, shouldn't I . . . for writing poetry?

WOODLEY

They do a bit. I don't mind. Here they are. [*He hands her a sheaf of MS. and returns case to cupboard.*]

LAURA

Thank you, I'll take great care of them. You share a study with Ainger, don't you?

WOODLEY

Yes.

LAURA

Are you great friends?

WOODLEY

Yes, I think so. Ainger's a splendid fellow. I like him awfully.

LAURA

Don't you ever want to be alone? Here with this room and sharing a study and a dormitory, don't you ever feel you want to get away from the others, however much you like them? I should.

WOODLEY

Yes, I do sometimes.

LAURA

But you like school. Or don't you?

WOODLEY

Yes, I like it awfully. I hated it at first.

LAURA

Were you bullied?

WOODLEY

Yes, a bit, and some of the masters were sarcastic and horrid because they saw I was homesick.

LAURA

Who? No, I oughtn't to ask that. I always feel awfully sorry for the new boys, I want to mother them, and be kind to them.

WOODLEY

I'm sure they wish you would.

[LAURA *goes to pictures around room.*]

LAURA

Are you in any of these?

WOODLEY

Yes, here, this was last year's group.

LAURA

Oh, yes, what a baby you looked there. Why do you blush . . . you were almost a baby, then.

WOODLEY

I was nearly seventeen.

LAURA

But it seems a long time ago, doesn't it? Don't you feel a terribly different person now? Much more grown up? More than a year?

WOODLEY

I feel an awful baby still.

LAURA

Who's this boy next to you? I know his face, don't I?

WOODLEY

Herpath. He left last year.

LAURA

Oh, yes. I remember. A horrid boy. Oh, a horrid boy.

[WOODLEY *starts.*]

Oh, I'm sorry. Was he a friend of yours?

WOODLEY

No, never a friend. I never liked him much.

LAURA

You're keen on games, aren't you? And you run too.

WOODLEY

Yes, a bit.

LAURA

I remember last year's sports. That was one school function that I did attend. I was awfully shy about going. But I enjoyed it.

WOODLEY

Shy? You?

LAURA

Yes, why not? I'm terribly shy.

WOODLEY

So am I.

LAURA

I know. [*Picks up book from table.*] What's this, Swinburne, yours?

WOODLEY

Yes.

LAURA

You like Swinburne?

WOODLEY

Yes, awfully.

LAURA

[*Opens book and reads softly aloud.*]

"Eyes coloured like a water-flower,
And deeper than the green sea's glass;
Eyes that remember one sweet hour—
In vain we swore it should not pass;
In vain, alas!"

WOODLEY

How beautifully you read it.

LAURA

It is rather beautiful, isn't it? [*She puts book down.*] But there are better than Swinburne. Have you discovered Shelley yet?

WOODLEY

Yes. [*He begins to recite.*]

"Swiftly walk over the Western Wave,
Spirit of night . . ."

LAURA

[*Joining gently.*]

"Blind with thine hair the eyes of day,
Kiss her until she be wearied out,
Then wander o'er city and sea and land,
Touching all with thy opiate wand.
Come, long sought."

WOODLEY

It's wonderful.

LAURA

Yes.

[*The door opens and* SIMMONS *comes in. He is a tall, lean, dried up man of nearly fifty.*]

SIMMONS

Oh, you here, Laura? I came to look for Ainger.

LAURA

So did I. I wanted to speak to him. He went out about five minutes ago!

WOODLEY

He's taking P.D., sir.

SIMMONS

I hope he enjoys it; you might tell him to see me after Chapel.

WOODLEY

Yes, sir.

SIMMONS

It isn't often that you condescend to visit the school, Laura.

LAURA

No, I know.

SIMMONS

And has our young friend Woodley, here, been entertaining you?

LAURA

Yes, very pleasantly.

SIMMONS

Woodley is our poet Laureate, you know, only he writes a good deal more than most Laureates. A

dreamer. Native woodnotes wild and all that. An infant Shelley, eh Woodley?

WOODLEY

Am I?

SIMMONS

Why this sudden modesty when you flaunt your rhapsodies before the world. Of course you are. We take ourselves very seriously, eyes in fine frenzy rolling . . . wear our hair long, don't we?

LAURA

Frank, we must be going. It's later than I thought.

SIMMONS

Perhaps you read his effusion in the school magazine? I, er—forget the title. What was it, Woodley?

LAURA

I remember. Reverie. I liked it.

SIMMONS

"Reverie"? Oh, yes. A dreamer as I said. Dark eyed maidens and romantic moons or something equally affecting, wasn't it? I trust it was generally appreciated, Woodley. But then poets never are, are they? They thrive on disregard. Always spurned and misunderstood in their lifetime. Well, perhaps you'll have the laugh on us when you're dead and they will set your verses to be learned by heart in P.D. if that is

any consolation to you. You're looking forward to dying young, I presume. [*He picks up book.*] What's this. Swinburne eh? You admire Swinburne, I suppose?

WOODLEY

Yes, sir.

SIMMONS

Nauseous stuff, but they all do at your age. It's a form of intellectual measles, but you will grow out of it.

LAURA

Frank, I must go.

SIMMONS

I'm coming. All the same a little more time on the Binomial Theorem wouldn't exactly do you any harm, Woodley. Not quite so enthralling as Mr. Swinburne's lilies and languors, perhaps, but a good deal healthier I can assure you. You'll tell Ainger I want to see him?

LAURA

[*Takes* WOODLEY'S *MS. from chair.*] Oh, I'm forgetting these.

SIMMONS

What have you got there?

LAURA

Only some recipes Mrs. Ratcliffe lent me. Goodbye.

[*She goes, with* SIMMONS. WOODLEY *stays where he is, thinking, picks up Swinburne, opens and gently reads aloud.*]

WOODLEY

"Eyes coloured like a water-flower,
And deeper than the green sea's glass . . ."

[*Shuts book, shakes himself and opens history. His mind wanders. Finally he slams the history together and hurls it into a corner.*]

Oh, damn George the First and all his bleeding Cabinet!

[VINING *comes in, cheerily singing the latest musical comedy tune.*]

VINING

Hello, all alone? Mrs. Simmy's been in here, hasn't she? Have I missed her?

WOODLEY

Yes.

VINING

Too bad. We don't exactly get a surfeit of female society. What did she want?

WOODLEY

Oh, nothing. To speak to Ainger about the kids in her back garden or something.

VINING

H'm. Funny her coming in here. Pretty little thing though. Hot stuff too, I should think. That quiet dark kind always are. Old Simmy's a lucky fellow. He knows what's what all right and I expect he makes the most of it too. That's the secret of the popularity of marriage, you know. I hope she likes it, that's all. Can't say I should care about being mauled by Simmy if I was a girl. Has she got a crush on Ainger, do you think, coming in here after him like that? Ainger's a good looking chap, bit of a change, after Simmy. Did you retire tactfully and leave them alone?

[WOODLEY *suddenly gets up and leaves the room, slamming the door behind him.*]

Here, what's up? Now . . . what the . . .

CURTAIN

ACT TWO

SCENE:—*Laura's Drawing Room.*

TIME:—*Three weeks later. About four in the afternoon.*

A pretty room with French windows leading on to a garden. A door in the back of the wall R. and another in the center of the L. wall. Fireplace in C. of R. wall. At right angles to it a long low chesterfield, L. of which is a small armchair, facing the fire. Below the door left a writing table R.C. The room is prettily furnished with pleasant cretonnes.

When the curtain rises, SIMMONS *is sitting at the desk L., correcting exercises.* LAURA *is curled up in the corner of the chesterfield.* SIMMONS *smokes a pipe.*

SIMMONS

[*Working.*] Oh, dear Fool! Ah, I thought that would catch him. There, done. [*He rises.*]

LAURA

Bad papers, Frank?

SIMMONS

No worse than usual, I suppose. I have long ceased to expect brilliance but I do at least hope for intelligence. Vainly, nine times out of ten. They learn the stuff parrot-wise. They never make the slightest attempt to understand it. You have only to set a question in ever so slightly unfamiliar a form, and it catches them at once.

LAURA

I sometimes wonder if men become schoolmasters for the joy of catching boys in exam-papers.

SIMMONS

They well might if it gives them any pleasure; but it is one that soon palls, I assure you. By the way I have only just noticed the date. Isn't it your birthday, Laura?

LAURA

Yes, is it?

SIMMONS

My congratulations.

LAURA

Thank you.

SIMMONS

Many happy returns of the day. [*He kisses her rather perfunctorily.*] You are not hurt at my having forgotten it, are you?

LAURA

No, I think I'd rather forget it myself.

SIMMONS

Why do you say that? Is anything the matter?

LAURA

Nothing curable, anyway, [*She lights cigarette.*]

SIMMONS

Laura, you are smoking far more than you used to these days, aren't you?

LAURA

Yes, it gives me something to do.

SIMMONS

It doesn't look well.

LAURA

Do you mean it doesn't suit me?

SIMMONS

Oh, don't be facetious. I mean I don't like to see it. It sets a bad example.

LAURA

I don't do it outside. I invariably refuse cigarettes at tea with the wives, as much as I long for them, for

your sake, Frank. I know they all think I am scandalously young to be a housemaster's wife. I must take the first opportunity of telling Mrs. Ratcliffe that I found a grey hair this morning.

SIMMONS

There is a bad spirit about the place these days.

LAURA

And do you think my smoking fosters it? What do you mean by a bad spirit? Lack of enthusiasm for Algebra?

SIMMONS

Oh, one can't talk seriously to you.

LAURA

I'm sorry. What is it, Frank? Tell me. You've not been looking well lately. You're worried about something. What's the matter?

SIMMONS

I suppose you have heard about this business of Riley?

LAURA

The boy who was expelled? Yes. Mrs. Plunkett was telling me at tea last week, as one married woman to another; with many unnecessary details, I thought. You didn't tell me anything about it.

SIMMONS

Well, it is scarcely a matter I should care to discuss with you. I imagined that you would hear from some of the ladies.

LAURA

What about it?

SIMMONS

It has left a very bad impression. There is too much of that sort of thing in the school. There is a spirit of unrest pervading the place. Never in all the twenty-five years that I have been here have I known it like this.

LAURA

I don't understand. What's wrong?

SIMMONS

It's difficult to explain. I can't put my finger on it; but it is the general tone. Sex. That is what it comes down to; a sort of unhealthy brooding. This affair of Riley's is only an instance, a flagrant one, I admit; but it is all of a piece.

LAURA

Surely you're exaggerating. Imagining?

SIMMONS

I wish I were. You don't see it, sitting here as you do and meeting them only when they are on their best behaviour. But, there is no respect. I've been notic-

ing it growing, more and more so since this business of Riley. I spoke to the Prefects, very seriously. But I can get nothing from them. No help, no cohesion. I am not at all sure that they are not responsible for a lot of the trouble. I never approved of the Prefect System. Their manner lately has been most offensive. All of them, young Woodley in particular. There is a surliness and cynicism about that boy, a sort of superiority. It is all this intellectual flapdoodle. He imagines himself too good for everyone. This rubbish about writing poetry. It is not healthy or normal in a boy. It all comes down to the same thing in the end. Sex. It is at the bottom of all the trouble. The school is going through a bad period, these things come in waves. A few of the wrong men at the top and the harm is done.

LAURA

Oh, surely, Frank . . . I don't know much about boys, and you should, but it seems scarcely possible to me. One or two cases, yes, I understand that, abnormal or vicious types. . . .

SIMMONS

It goes deeper than that. You don't realize. Because a boy has a pretty baby face you think he is all innocence and guilelessness. If you had spent your life as I have, you would know what sinks of impurity their minds can be.

LAURA

Isn't it the system? I have no brothers, but I have

watched since I have been here, and it seems to me that it is a great mistake to cut boys off like that, from their homes, from women, just at the age when they are most sensitive, most curious. It is an impressionable age and I can't help feeling that perhaps they need a little sympathy and understanding. That they can't get from men and from each other.

SIMMONS

I know that argument. You get it in the novels that young men write as soon as they are let out into the world. They want to turn a Public School into a sort of Zenna.

LAURA

And what's your remedy?

SIMMONS

Discipline and a healthy observance of games and a proper inculcation of the Public School spirit. There is no *esprit de corps,* no decent feeling. . . .

LAURA

Frank, can't we get away from here?

SIMMONS

Get away? Why?

LAURA

Oh, I don't. It is on top of me. All of it, everything. The other masters, their wives, the selfishness,

the littleness, the lack of understanding. These boys, they are transparent, as clear as crystal, and you see them distorted, twisted. You have no feeling for them, save for their respect for you, their conforming to a few stupid forms and ceremonies. You don't think of them as young developing beings, just coming out into the world, wondering terribly what it is all going to be like. Excited, eager, rough and blundering if you like; but honest, decent, happy, amongst themselves, left to themselves.

SIMMONS

Well, really, this is amazing. You, of all people, to talk like that. You who never go near a school function, who stammer and can't make conversation, when I ask the House Prefects to tea. What do you know of them? What can you know of them?

LAURA

No, I know. I was imagining, that's all.

SIMMONS

Precisely, romancing, sentimentalising, as usual, instead of facing the problem. As to leaving here, you know my feelings on that point. If I could get a headmastership I would leave like a shot. You know I have tried. It is no fault of mine.

LAURA

I know. Besides, it would be the same elsewhere, or worse. I'm afraid I am not fitted to be a school-

master's wife. Tell me, that young master, Campbell. He seems to get on well with the boys. To be friendly with them, to play games with them. What has he to say about this?

SIMMONS

In heaven's name, why drag in Campbell? I don't at all approve of that young man. He is far too free and easy with the boys. That sort of thing destroys respect.

LAURA

I thought he was very popular.

SIMMONS

Popular! Oh, I daresay. Anyone can be popular if he will stoop to play down to it. Education is a science, and any fool thinks he can play at it these days.

LAURA

Yes.

SIMMONS

It needs experience and a firm hand. This spirit that is about has got to be stamped out, at all costs. Well, I am going down to watch the cricket. I suppose it is no use asking you to come?

LAURA

I don't think so.

SIMMONS

You should come, Laura. If not for your own sake, then for mine. It looks bad you staying away from

everything as you do, as if you took no interest. I get no help, even from you. Out of respect for me you might come. A match like today's . . .

LAURA

Well, I can't come today. I have invited Ainger and Woodley to tea.

SIMMONS

You have? You never told me.

LAURA

I forgot.

SIMMONS

When did you ask them?

LAURA

Yesterday. I met Woodley in the lane.

SIMMONS

What time? What was he doing there?

LAURA

About five o'clock. I have no idea what he was doing. I think he'd been for a walk.

SIMMONS

He ought to have been at the nets. Slackness again. That young man is going the wrong way. What made you ask him to tea?

LAURA

I thought I would like to. They are nice boys, both of them, and they are friends.

SIMMONS

Well, I wish you wouldn't. That's my province. I don't want the boys in and out of this side of the house at all hours like that. You might use a little discretion. Still, I suppose, as you have asked them . . . Anyway I am not going to stay away from the match for that. They ought to be watching. You might have known that.

LAURA

I didn't think. Anyway they never said so.

SIMMONS

Of course not. Any excuse to shirk their duty to the school. Even if it is only coming here to be bored by tea.

LAURA

Why should they be bored?

SIMMONS

Why? Great Heavens. Is there anything more depressing and boring in this world than a drawing room tea-party?

LAURA

Why do you ask them then, as you do, on Sundays?

SIMMONS

Because it's expected of me. But you can't pretend it's enjoyable.

LAURA

And why not? Whose fault is that? Yours! Because you are not human. Because you can never get away from the schoolmaster, never forget your position and your dignity, and that you are talking down to them. Isn't it possible for master and boy to meet and talk on a level; like normal human beings?

SIMMONS

Not without immediately destroying that relation and all its respect.

LAURA

I don't believe it.

SIMMONS

You mentioned Campbell just now. Well, take him as a case to point. Watch him with the boys. Could you tell by looking at them which was master and which was boy?

LAURA

And that seems to me to be the essence of a good schoolmaster. There are times, Frank, when I can't recognise you, when I can't see the man in you for the schoolmaster, when I look helplessly for the man I married.

SIMMONS

Are you hurt because I suggested that Ainger and Woodley would be bored by coming to tea with you?

LAURA

I am not a child, Frank.

SIMMONS

You are being extremely childish and absurd.

LAURA

Oh, very well. Frank, why can't you behave normally and unaffectedly towards them. Why carry the classroom attitude into your ordinary existence. Even in the holidays I have noticed it. Among other people; that domineering, self-conscious attitude of the pedagogue that hangs around you like a halo.

SIMMONS

Why, when you have quite done pulling me to pieces will you tell me what all this means?

LAURA

Oh, it is useless for me to talk, I know. But it seems to me so wrong, so unnecessarily wrong, that there should be such a barrier between you. A little common humanity is all that is needed. . . .

SIMMONS

Are you proposing to play Blind-Man's Buff with them, or Postman's Knock?

LAURA

I am sorry. I was a fool to talk to you, to expect you to understand. God, if I had known it would be like this . . .

SIMMONS

What then?

LAURA

I would never have come here. Never have married you. You only married me because you wanted someone to play the staff-lady, because a housemaster is expected to be a married man and his wife to enhance his petty little dignity.

SIMMONS

Now you are merely getting hysterical and foolish. If you feel like that about it, why did you marry me?

LAURA

Because I had not seen you at it.

SIMMONS

At it? . . . What do you mean?

LAURA

Mean? All that I have been talking about for the last half hour. Because I thought you were a man and not a mass prejudice. Oh, for God's sake leave me alone.

SIMMONS

Well, good-bye.

LAURA

Good-bye.

[SIMMONS *goes out of window.* LAURA *presses her face against her hands. Goes to window and back to seat.* MAID *enters.*]

MAID

Mr. Woodley.

[WOODLEY *enters.*]

LAURA

[*Shaking hands.*] Good afternoon. Will you bring tea, Maude? Mr. Simmons won't be in.

[MAID *goes.*]

Didn't you bring Ainger with you?

WOODLEY

He couldn't come. He is awfully sorry. He sent a note. I've got it here. [*Feels in his pockets.*] He had to play in the match at the last minute. Townley has sprained his ankle. [*He finds letter.*] Here you are.

LAURA

Thanks. Wouldn't you rather be watching the match since your friend is playing?

WOODLEY

No. I can see him play any time. Has your—Mr. Simmons gone to watch?

LAURA

Yes, my—Mr. Simmons has. I ought to have thought of the match when I asked you yesterday. Why didn't you tell me?

WOODLEY

Oh, I . . . I . . . thought . . .

LAURA

You guessed that I shouldn't be at the match, I suppose.

WOODLEY

Why do you never come, Mrs. Simmons?

LAURA

I've told you before. Because I am shy. Besides I would hate to come and play the schoolmaster's wife and be stared at and wished out of the way. If I come I should like to come just simply and freely as you do.

WOODLEY

Why don't you come then? Besides, it wouldn't be like that a bit. You are not like the other masters' wives.

LAURA

Thank you.

WOODLEY

I didn't mean . . . anyway, you are not.

[MAID *comes in with tea on a tray. She puts it on round table which she brings in front of* LAURA, *and goes.*]

LAURA

Sugar and milk, isn't it? Help yourself to things, please.

WOODLEY

[*Passing plate.*] Won't you?

LAURA

[*Taking sandwich.*] Thanks. [*Hands him tea.*] I must give you back your poems before you go. I told you yesterday that I liked them, didn't I?

WOODLEY

Yes. I'm awfully glad.

LAURA

How old are you . . . eighteen?

WOODLEY

Nearly.

LAURA

You are awfully experimental, if you know what I mean. You write as if you were trying to find out something. All poets do, of course. All good poets. The bad ones think they know already.

WOODLEY

Well, I suppose I am.

LAURA

What, exactly? Do you know?

WOODLEY

Just what everything is about. What it is all for. I don't think they are very good, really. You see, I get hold of something, an idea, I imagine it, because I haven't had much experience, really. One doesn't at school. And then it may be all different. Sometimes I feel I know an awful lot about life, and then something happens and all my plans get upset and it isn't anything like I imagined it.

LAURA

The best ones are the ones when you are writing about things you know. About the country, and friendship.

WOODLEY

You mean the others are rubbish? The ones I like best, probably.

LAURA

Which ones are those?

WOODLEY

Well, there was one called "Love Song." I don't know whether you remember it.

LAURA

Yes. I didn't care for it as much as the others.

WOODLEY

Of course I was awfully young when I wrote it. There was one I wrote last night. Like that, only better, I think. I've got it here if you would care to read it.

LAURA

Please, won't you read it to me?

WOODLEY

Yes, if . . . if . . . you would rather.

LAURA

Do.

WOODLEY

[*Pulls paper from pocket.*] It is a sonnet.

LAURA

Yes.

WOODLEY

I think your face was Helen's. For your sake
The Trojan ruins flame. In anguish dumb
The dying Tristram stares with eyes that ache
Across the lonely waves, to see you come,
Enslaved by your first kiss. And Romeo
Steals through the moonlight garden silently,
To find that subtle smile that well I know,
And you are standing on the balcony.

Oh, lovers all throughout the world have known
Your shadowed beauty, and when poets say
Their love was such, I think I know the way
You held their reason captive. You alone
Have swayed all men through time, in every land.
He loved, and she was fair. I understand.

[WOODLEY *puts paper back in pocket. A silence.*]

LAURA

Woodley—by the way, your name is Roger, isn't it? Do you mind if I call you by it?

WOODLEY

Please, please do.

LAURA

Well, Roger . . . Oh, I'm forgetting all about tea.

Do help yourself. Let me give you some more. Pass your cup.

[WOODLEY *does so.*]

WOODLEY

Do you like the poem?

LAURA

Very much. Tell me something about yourself, Roger. Your home is in London, isn't it?

WOODLEY

Yes, in Hampstead. Do you know it?

LAURA

No, not at all. Have you any brothers or sisters?

WOODLEY

No, none.

LAURA

Your parents are alive?

WOODLEY

Only my father. My mother died when I was a baby. I've an aunt who lives with us. She brought me up, really.

LAURA

Yes, I was an only child too. It stamps one, I think. I was awfully lonely. Were you?

WOODLEY

No, I don't think so.

LAURA

Perhaps it was the country. My home was in the Lake District. Have you ever been there?

WOODLEY

Yes, we spent one summer holiday at Borrowdale. I loved it. I did a lot of climbing. It's wonderful country.

LAURA

Isn't it? My home was at Rydalwater. I lived there always until I was married. I still miss the mountains. They become like friends.

WOODLEY

Did you . . . did you meet Mr. Simmons there?

LAURA

Yes. He was on a walking holiday.

WOODLEY

I didn't know he was keen on the country.

LAURA

He's very fond of climbing.

WOODLEY

Is he? Oh . . .

LAURA

You are not eating anything. Do have some cake.

WOODLEY

No, thanks very much. I've finished.

LAURA

But you had nothing.

WOODLEY

Really, thanks.

LAURA

More tea?

WOODLEY

No, thanks. Nothing.

LAURA

Really? Well, let's get it out of the way. Perhaps you would move the tray, would you? You might put it over there.

[WOODLEY *moves tray to armchair L. U.*]

LAURA

Will you have a cigarette . . . or . . . I suppose you're not allowed to smoke? [*She pats settee.* WOODLEY *sits.*]

WOODLEY

No . . . thanks very much.

LAURA

We have met several times lately, walking, haven't we? You are fond of the country?

WOODLEY

Yes, it's lovely looking now, with the hawthorn out. And the trees are wonderful.

LAURA

Do you ever go up to Mallow Woods?

WOODLEY

No, they are out of bounds.

LAURA

Are they? I wonder why. I was thinking of walking over there on Sunday . . . tomorrow, perhaps you . . .

WOODLEY

I wouldn't, if I were you.

LAURA

Why ever not?

WOODLEY

Oh, Sundays . . . I don't think . . . I mean, the townspeople go, and it isn't always . . . well . . . quite nice.

LAURA

Oh, then I won't. [*She gets cigarette from mantel. After pause.*] Tell me, I was meaning to ask you. There's a little boy called Cope . . . he is the prefects' fag, isn't he?

WOODLEY

Yes. What about him?

LAURA

What sort of a boy is he?

WOODLEY

Oh, just a kid. Why?

LAURA

He came to me the other day . . . with some rather embarrassing questions. I wondered why . . . whether it really was ignorance and curiosity—or whether it was done for a joke.

WOODLEY

What did he want to know?

LAURA

It was about this business with the Riley boy. He wanted to know about that.

WOODLEY

The little . . . I say, I'm awfully sorry. He ought to have had more sense, but he's awfully innocent.

LAURA

You think it really was innocence?

WOODLEY

Oh, yes, rather—unless——

LAURA

Unless——?

WOODLEY

Nothing. I'm awfully sorry, though.

LAURA

It's not your fault. Besides, if it was genuine, it doesn't matter. Go on telling me about yourself, Roger. What are you going to do when you leave school?

WOODLEY

I shall be going to Cambridge, I think, in October. I'm looking forward to it awfully.

LAURA

Then this is your last term here? You'll be leaving in July? I hadn't realized it.

WOODLEY

Yes, I—I'm afraid so. And after that my father wants me to go into his business, I think. I'm not very keen.

LAURA

What is it?

WOODLEY

Soap.

LAURA

Soap?

WOODLEY

Yes. Woodley's Wildflowers. Pretty awful, isn't it? Still, I daresay it won't be so bad.

LAURA

Is there anything you'd rather do?

WOODLEY

I don't know. Sometimes I think I want to write. But I suppose that's just a phase that I'll pass through.

LAURA

I'm sorry my husband spoke to you as he did the other evening about your writing.

WOODLEY

Oh, please, it's quite all right.

LAURA

I've been wanting to tell you that. It hurt me.

WOODLEY

Oh, it doesn't matter. I don't think Mr. Simmons quite understands.

LAURA

No. He's not very popular, is he?

WOODLEY

Oh, I——

LAURA

You needn't mind telling me. Or, you needn't tell me. I know he's not. I don't know why I asked.

WOODLEY

I don't think he means it.

LAURA

Do you wonder I don't care to go to school functions, when I know how people are feeling towards him, hating him, and me, as his wife, as though, just because I am his wife, I must be like him. Do you wonder that I loathe the place?

WOODLEY

Loathe it?

LAURA

Yes, loathe it. It's all dreadful, hideous. And he——

WOODLEY

I'm so sorry—I had no idea. Don't—don't cry, please.

LAURA

Oh, God. Why are things made like that? Why have people no sense, no understanding? I'm sorry. I didn't mean to behave like that. Please forgive me. It won't happen again, Roger. [*She touches his hand lightly; he flinches.*]

WOODLEY

I wish I could help, do something. I'd do anything.

LAURA

It's all right. It was foolish of me. I am all right now.

WOODLEY

And it's not like you think. No one feels like that about you. They all like you awfully. They can't understand . . .

LAURA

How I came to marry Mr. Simmons. Is that it?

WOODLEY

I must be going.

LAURA

Must you, really?

WOODLEY

Yes, I have work to do. Good-bye and—thank you very much.

LAURA

I'm sorry, you must come again soon.

WOODLEY

No—I—think—if you don't mind—it would be better —if I didn't come again.

LAURA

Never?

WOODLEY

Well, not alone—not like this.

LAURA

You needn't mind what you said—or rather didn't say—about Mr. Simmons.

WOODLEY

It isn't that.

LAURA

What is it, then? Don't you want to come?

WOODLEY

Yes, I—I want to awfully, but—really, it would be better not.

LAURA

But why, Roger?

WOODLEY

Oh, I—I oughtn't to tell you. You'll hate me for it. You'll never want to see me again—but I—feel awful about it—but—but—well, I'm most terribly in love with you. There, now I've said it. Are you furious with me?

LAURA

Furious?

WOODLEY

I meant not to tell you ever—but I couldn't help it. I'll go now. [*He moves to door.*]

LAURA

Roger, why did you think I'd be furious?

WOODLEY

Well, aren't you?

LAURA

Furious? Roger——

[*She holds out her arms to him. He stands and gazes at her a moment wide-eyed, then stumbles across to her and falls on his knees beside the sofa, his head in her lap.*]

Roger darling—Roger——

[*She stoops and kisses his head. He raises his face to hers. His arm slips around her shoulders and their lips meet in a long kiss.*]

Don't cry. [*She raises him to the sofa beside her.*]

WOODLEY

Oh, I've been feeling so awful about this. I do love you so terribly. You're so wonderful. I never dreamt— [*He takes her hand and kisses it passionately.*] And you're unhappy—I couldn't bear to see you—like that. It was dreadful. Why did you marry him? You don't love him.

LAURA

No.

WOODLEY

Why—why did you?

LAURA

I don't know, and I was lonely, and—don't speak of him now. Roger, my darling. [*She buries her lips in his hair.*]

WOODLEY

All day long I've been telling myself I wouldn't come this afternoon. I thought I oughtn't to see you again. I thought it was wrong and wicked of me, and that you'd hate me if you knew. You mustn't stay with him, you must leave him, now that you know I love you like this.

LAURA

I can't, Roger. You mustn't think of it. It's impossible.

WOODLEY

You must, Laura, I love you more than anything in the world. Laura——

LAURA

Roger, kiss me again. Don't speak, kiss me.

[*Another rapturous embrace follows. While they are locked in each other's arms,* SIMMONS *appears at the open window. He stands transfixed.*]

SIMMONS

Laura!

[*The couple on the sofa leap apart startled.* WOODLEY *starts, rises.* SIMMONS *comes down center, now in control of himself.*]

Will you have the goodness to explain what this extraordinary conduct means?

WOODLEY

I am in love with your wife.

SIMMONS

Indeed? And you have the face to tell me that.

LAURA

[*Rises.*] Frank——

WOODLEY

Yes, why not? I've told her.

SIMMONS

I think you had better remove yourself, my friend, and the sooner the better. I'll deal with you, later.

WOODLEY

No—we must have this out now.

LAURA

Roger—go, please.

WOODLEY

I am not afraid of him—now.

SIMMONS

Indeed? How very interesting—quite a knight-errant, in fact. *Sans peur et sans reproche!* And what has made you so brave all of a sudden? However, we'll see about that. You will now go to your study and wait for me there.

WOODLEY

No, I won't go. I'll stay here.

LAURA

Roger, I asked you——

WOODLEY

I've a right to stay. I've a right to know what he is going to do.

SIMMONS

You'll learn that soon enough, my friend.

WOODLEY

You think because I'm a boy and you're my master——

LAURA

Roger, please——

WOODLEY

Very well, I'll go.

SIMMONS

Thank you.

WOODLEY

If you want me, Laura——

LAURA

Yes—go now——

[*Exit* WOODLEY *L.*]

SIMMONS

Well, this is a charming situation. So this is what it has come to.

LAURA

Yes.

SIMMONS

Yes? Is that all you have to say? Yes? Don't you realize what this means? Here—in my drawing room—with one of my own boys—and Woodley of all boys.

LAURA

Well?

SIMMONS

How could you so humiliate yourself? and me, too?

LAURA

Ah!

SIMMONS

To cheapen yourself like that! If you had no moral sense to restrain you, I should have thought at least you had more sense of your own dignity, of your position.

LAURA

My dignity, my position! I've none—none! [*Rises.*]

SIMMONS

Well, mine, then. You are my wife; you hold a position of trust, of responsibility. That's what you have never realized.

LAURA

I am a human being. That's what you have never realized.

SIMMONS

Oh, please spare me that cant. You will be telling me next that you are only flesh and blood, and that you have red blood in your veins.

LAURA

Well, so I have. Not—mineral water, like you!

SIMMONS

Do you think you can justify your conduct by abusing me?

LAURA

You don't consider the possibility of my being in love with him?

SIMMONS

In love with a boy like that. Don't be ridiculous. How long has this been going on?

LAURA

Going on? I don't understand. What?

SIMMONS

This little affair of yours. It accounts for a good deal. I am beginning to understand quite a lot of things. This is the meaning of your talk of a woman's influence——

LAURA

You are wrong, Frank, today was the first time that there has ever been anything.

SIMMONS

Why do you bother to lie to me?

LAURA

You don't believe me?

SIMMONS

I do not. [*Goes to desk.*]

LAURA

Then you must do the other thing. It is true all the same. [*Crosses L.*]

SIMMONS

The transparency of it! You ask him here when you know that I am out of the . . . You lie to me, tell me that you asked Ainger, as well, to divert my suspicions.

LAURA

I did ask Ainger, as it happens.

SIMMONS

Oh, don't quibble. Yes, you asked him when you knew he couldn't come. Hypocrisy. Ainger was playing in the match, and you knew it perfectly well.

LAURA

[*Taking letter.*] Very well, then. Read that. A note from Ainger. Woodley brought it with him. Now.

SIMMONS

[*Crosses down to her. After reading it.*] H'm—well——

LAURA

Well?

SIMMONS

I apologize.

LAURA

Thank you.

SIMMONS

So this was a mere affair of the moment on which I so unfortunately intruded?

LAURA

Yes.

SIMMONS

And you are in no way ashamed of your behaviour?

LAURA

[*Crosses to mantel.*] Ashamed? Sorry, perhaps.

SIMMONS

I'll make him sorry. That young man is going to pay for his amusement.

LAURA

What are you going to do?

SIMMONS

Do? What do you suppose? Do you imagine that I am going to keep him here now? I shall go straight

to the Head—get him expelled. [*Goes to desk, gets cap and gown, to center.*]

LAURA

Frank, you can't! [*Crosses to him.*]

SIMMONS

Can't I? Ha!

LAURA

No, you can't. Frank, listen, it was my fault . . . utterly, I led him on—I made him make love to me—I was a fool, yes, if you like. God knows why I did it, but just for an instant I forgot everything—everything. Nothing seemed to matter but the moment.

SIMMONS

Ve-ry nice.

LAURA

You can't expel him—you mustn't. It was my fault, I tell you—mine—all of it. You can't make him suffer for it.

SIMMONS

Oh, I daresay. I have no doubt that you were as much to blame as he. But a boy is not bound to make love to a woman merely because she asks him to—and that woman the wife of his house master. No, he'll pay for it all right. [*Moves down.*]

LAURA

Frank—I tell you—there has been nothing—nothing wrong between us. I swear it. I don't know what

you imagine, but that kiss . . . that you saw . . . that was the first—the first time ever. How could he help it, when I behaved as I did. It was mad of me—mad—I know.

SIMMONS

You are beginning to realise it?

LAURA

You can't expel him for that. You don't realise what it will mean to him . . . it will follow him through life, ruin him.

SIMMONS

You have betrayed me, utterly. Do you think I shall tolerate that? No, by God! Ruin him, indeed! Well, I hope it will. I'll do all I can. I shall go to the Head now—at once. [*He turns to door.*]

LAURA

Frank.

[SIMMONS *at door L.*]

SIMMONS

I don't think there is any need to prolong this discussion. [*Turns again to door.*]

LAURA

Wait. [*Crosses center level with him.*] Frank, if Woodley goes, if you get him expelled, I'll leave you.

SIMMONS

Don't be childish.

LAURA

I mean it.

SIMMONS

Rubbish—you couldn't.

LAURA

I mean it, Frank. It has not been much of a success, our marriage, and you know it. I've tried, God knows, I've tried, but this will be the end. If you do this, I shall leave you, for good—I have thought of it often enough these last few years.

SIMMONS

You can't blackmail me into giving way, Laura.

LAURA

You can call it what you like. It's true, though. [*She turns to settee.*]

SIMMONS

You are insane. You don't realise what you are saying. How could you leave me? [*Crosses to center table.*]

LAURA

How? How? You haven't realised how near I have been before, how wretched I've been, what a

ghastly mistake our marriage has been. You have been too wrapped up in your position, your little dignity, your own self-importance. Well, think of them now, then. Where will they be, how will you feel, if I leave you—openly—as I shall if you do this thing. Everyone will know . . . don't deceive yourself about that . . . where will your position and your authority be then?

SIMMONS

Laura, what is the meaning of this, why are you taking this line? The thing is incredible!

[LAURA *sitting in armchair at end of speech.*]

LAURA

I tell you . . . you can choose. If he goes, I go.

SIMMONS

But—but . . . I don't understand this. Are you in love with the boy that you are behaving in this amazing way? [*Crosses to settee.*]

LAURA

You said that was impossible.

SIMMONS

I should have thought it was, but women are unaccountable. Are you?

LAURA

I don't know—yes, perhaps. But never mind that.

SIMMONS

Oh, this is beyond me! But if . . . if . . . if I do let this go for your sake— [*Crosses to door R. then down to center.*] But how can I? You must realise how impossible the situation is. It will be all over the school. My life won't be worth living. I shall be an object of ridicule. [*Sits by tea table.*]

LAURA

[*Over chair.*] And if I leave you, what then? An object of pity? But you need not fear. [*Rises.*] Nobody will know. How should they?

SIMMONS

How? I should have thought it was obvious. Young Woodley isn't going to keep this to himself, his triumph over me—how I caught you . . . and did nothing.

LAURA

He won't tell. I can answer for that.

SIMMONS

And meanwhile I am to let it continue—connive at your carrying on with him, while I sit and play the *mari complaisant?* Is it likely? Humiliate myself like

that . . . for a damned, smirking, superior little pup of a schoolboy! Not I! Do you think I have no pride? I'll face the talk and scandal rather. [*He moves to door.*]

LAURA

Frank, listen. [*Crosses center.*] If you do nothing to him I promise—I won't see him again. I'll do all I can for you, to play my part better as your wife. I mean it, Frank.

SIMMONS

You seem to forget that the mischief is done. Am I to see him always—laughing up his sleeve, knowing that he has got the better of me, that I am afraid to move?

LAURA

If you think of him like that . . . besides, what is the alternative! It is he—or everyone. But I tell you, you will have nothing to fear. Nobody will know and it shall never happen again—never. I have learned my lesson; some things are too dearly bought and this is his last term here. There you have it, Frank. If you ruin him, as you want to do, I shall leave you, openly and for ever, make no mistake about that; there is nothing to hold me. It is only your pride that makes you hesitate; but if you will conquer that, I promise you everything shall be all right, always. Now you can choose. [*She sits on settee.*]

SIMMONS

[*At center window.*] Laura, I know everything?

LAURA

Yes.

SIMMONS

I shall think it over.

[*Exits.* LAURA *rises and rings bell,* MAID *comes.*]

LAURA

Will you take the tea-things, Maude?

MAID

Yes'm. And please'm, young Mr. Woodley is waiting in the hall.

LAURA

Mr. Woodley?

MAID

Yes'm—he has been waiting about a quarter of an hour.

LAURA

Oh——

[MAID *takes tea-things and goes to door.*]

MAID

Will you see Mr. Woodley now, mum?

LAURA

Yes—show him in.

[MAID *goes.* LAURA *moves to center.* MAID *shows* WOODLEY *in and retires. He moves quickly to her. She puts out her hand to stop him.*]

WOODLEY

What has happened?

LAURA

It is all right. It will be all right.

WOODLEY

What did he say? I've been waiting outside, waiting until you were alone. Why wouldn't you let me stay?

LAURA

I couldn't—you must understand that.

WOODLEY

What did he say? Is he going to divorce you?

LAURA

Divorce? In heaven's name why should he?

WOODLEY

Why? When he saw what we did?

LAURA

You don't divorce your wife because you find someone kissing her.

WOODLEY

But I love you. I told him that.

LAURA

Even so . . .

WOODLEY

But I don't understand. What did you mean when you said it would be all right?

LAURA

That he is not going to do anything.

WOODLEY

You call that all right?

LAURA

You don't understand me. I was thinking of you. It will go no further.

WOODLEY

But—but—I wasn't thinking of myself. That doesn't matter now. It's you, Laura—you can't stay with him, feeling about him as you do . . . after that . . . after he saw you . . . after I told him. He must divorce you. I don't know how these things are done,

but surely when people find that things are like that—they don't stay together.

LAURA

Roger, come and sit down. I want to talk to you.

[*She goes to her old corner on the Chesterfield. He is about to follow.*]

No, over there.

[*She points to chair at right angles to Chesterfield. He sits.*]

Roger, I don't know what you thought, but obviously this can go no further.

WOODLEY

Why? I don't understand.

LAURA

You yourself said it would be better for you not to come again.

WOODLEY

But that—that was before I—it was because I was afraid . . . I was afraid to tell you what I felt. I thought you would hate me if you knew. I never dreamed that there was any chance—but now, now——

LAURA

Nothing has changed, Roger.

WOODLEY

Nothing? But everything has changed. What do you mean? You let me tell you—let me kiss you.

You know I love you. You love me, too. Why—why do you say nothing has changed?

LAURA

Roger—listen to me. It is hard for me to explain, but you are taking all this too seriously. It was wrong of me, I know, to behave as I did—to let you kiss me, —but . . . I was sorry for you and—I just didn't think. But that is all there is to it. It means no more than that.

WOODLEY

You mean—you don't love me . . . you were only —playing with me?

[LAURA *is silent.*]

Very well. Then I'll go. [*He rises and goes to the door.*]

LAURA

Wait—I haven't finished.

WOODLEY

What is it? What do you want?

LAURA

I want you to come and sit down again and listen to me quietly. Please.

[WOODLEY *returns to chair.*]

WOODLEY

Well?

LAURA

You must forget all this. I've been to blame, I know. I let you think I meant all sorts of things. I wanted you to think so. But now, as I say, it is over. You must be sensible and forget it. It won't be very difficult. There'll be your work and your games. You have been neglecting them . . . you've been getting too sentimental. And then you'll be leaving . . . there will be Cambridge. And new interests. Soon you'll be able to laugh about it. You blame me now. You think I've made a fool of you.

WOODLEY

I've made a fool of myself.

LAURA

No, Roger. Besides, you'll get over that. You'll look on this differently in time. You'll hear no more of it, if you'll be sensible about it. I can promise you that. You needn't fear.

WOODLEY

As if that mattered now. As if I cared about that. Did you think that was why I came back? But I'm sorry. I see I made a mistake. Thank you for—interceding with Mr. Simmons for me. But don't you think he would rather be rid of me?

LAURA

Roger, please don't take it like that——

WOODLEY

Is there anything else?

LAURA

No.

WOODLEY

Then I'll go. [*He goes to door. Stops and comes back a step or two.*] Oh—might I have my poems back?

LAURA

Of course—I forgot. I'll give them to you.

[*She takes them from a locked drawer in the desk. Hands them to him and then goes over to the fireplace. He takes them, looks at them for a moment and then tears them across twice and flings the pieces on the floor.*]

Why do you do that?

WOODLEY

I've been getting too sentimental. Good-bye.

CURTAIN

ACT THREE

SCENE I

SCENE:—*The Prefects' Room as before.*

TIME:—*Tea-time. Two days later.*

MILNER is sitting alone above the table L.C. finishing his tea. The gramophone is playing a revue tune. VINING *comes in, he fox-trots idly around the room until the tune finishes. He turns off the machine and comes and sits down.*

VINING

We ought to get some records from the "Girl on the Landing." It's a first rate show, got some topping tunes in it. I saw it in the holidays. Perl Rossiter is absolutely great. You've seen those photos in the sketch of the nightgown scene, haven't you? She's Battling Sawyer's mistress, you know.

MILNER

How do you know?

VINING

Know? Why, everybody knows. Some peach, I tell you. Finest pair of legs in London, and doesn't she show 'em. My brother's been eight times—front row stalls—chuck me a chocolate biscuit, if there are any left.

MILNER

Catch.

[*He throws one.* VINING *picks it up from the floor.*]

Where's everybody?

VINING

Ainger and Woodley are down at the nets. Haven't they been in to tea yet?

MILNER

Nobody's been in. Hello, here's Ainger.

[*Enter* AINGER.]

AINGER

Any tea going? [*He sits above table R. and pours out tea for himself.*]

MILNER

I say, Ainger, what is the matter with Simmy these days?

AINGER

I don't know.

MILNER

He's in a hell of a rage about something. Look at the way he flared up in a second this morning, because I hadn't got my protractor. He raved as if I had committed the seven deadly sins and then some.

AINGER

I don't know. Liver, I should think.

MILNER

Well, I don't see why I should have to suffer for his over-eating himself.

VINING

And what is the matter with young Woodley? That kid's been going about looking like two pen'oth of Gord 'elp us, these last two days.

AINGER

I don't know. There is something wrong. I can't make out what it is. I can't get a word out of him. Simmy has been pretty hang-dog too.

MILNER

There is a bot of an atmosphere about the place. And I've seen him lurking through the corridors, too, in rubber-soled shoes. What's he after? Is it still his purity stunt? What did he want with you at the match on Saturday? I saw him come and talk to you

while you were putting your pads on, and I thought he looked rather fed. Did you say anything to annoy him?

AINGER

I couldn't make that out. You know him. Simmy asked Woodley and me to tea and I couldn't go because of Townley's ankle. Well, Simmy came up and said: "Ah, Ainger, I didn't expect to find you here. I thought you found social distractions more absorbing than athletics" or some bilge like that. I didn't know what he was getting at, and anyway I was in a hurry, so I'm afraid I was rather terse with him. And then he asked if "my young Satellite Woodley" was about. Well, I didn't see why I should tell him that Woodley had gone to tea with his wife, he probably only wanted an opportunity to get off some joke he'd prepared about it, so I said I did not know. He seemed no end peeved over that.

MILNER

What did it mean?

AINGER

God only knows, I don't.

VINING

And had young Woodley gone to tea with languorous Laura?

AINGER

Yes.

VINING

And Simmy was at the match. Lucky devil. Perhaps Simmy was jealous. Did he know you had been asked?

AINGER

I don't know. Apparently Mrs. Simmy met Woodley in the lane and asked us then. I expect she told him.

VINING

Perhaps she didn't. Perhaps she wanted a tête-à-tête. Naughty! Naughty! I thought she had a crush on you, Ainger. Still, half a loaf is better than none. And when women get to that age they like 'em dewy and cherubimmy like young Woodley.

AINGER

I always told you he was a dark horse.

VINING

I must rag him about it. Did he say anything about it when he got back?

AINGER

Divil a word. He spent the whole evening with his nose in Virgil and I couldn't get a word out of him. He's been like that ever since.

VINING

H'm—h'm! We'll have some fun out of this.

AINGER

You're not to rag him, Vining! The kid is upset about something.

VINING

[*Crosses to center.*] Oh, rot. He probably tried to hold her hand and she wouldn't let him. Well, I'm going up. Coming, Milner?

MILNER

Right you are. Open the door carefully. Simmy may be key-holing outside and you might give him a black eye.

[VINING *opens the door with a jerk. Looks to R. and L. Calls.*]

VINING

Sim—my! Sim—my! Puss! Puss! Puss!

[*Exit* VINING *and* MILNER. *Enter* WOODLEY.]

AINGER

Hello!

[WOODLEY *does not answer. He comes to table. Sits down R. of it. Pours milk into his cup. Looks round for the teapot, pulls it away from* AINGER'S *book which falls into the jam.*]

Here, look out. Mind my book. It's gone into the jam now.

WOODLEY

Sorry!

AINGER

Well, you might ask another time. What made you so late anyway? You left the nets before I did.

WOODLEY

I thought you might have finished tea by now.

AINGER

What do you mean by that?

WOODLEY

Oh, nothing. [*He goes to settle. Knocks stuff down.*] Damn!

AINGER

What's up, eh?

WOODLEY

Nothing. Your monkey is, apparently.

AINGER

Oh, don't be funny.

WOODLEY

I wasn't being funny. I was speaking the truth.

AINGER

You wanted to avoid having tea with me. Was that it?

WOODLEY

Oh, shut up. I'm trying to read.

[AINGER *takes book and throws it into corner.*]

AINGER

Now then. What is it?

WOODLEY

If you won't let me have my tea in peace, I must go.

AINGER

Sit down and don't be a damned fool.

WOODLEY

Will you let me go?

AINGER

No, I won't. I want to have this out.

WOODLEY

Well, you can want, then.

AINGER

I say, I'm sorry if I was shirty.

WOODLEY

So you ought to be.

AINGER

Won't you tell me what is the matter?

WOODLEY

There's nothing the matter with me. You seem to be suffering from hallucinations.

[WOODLEY *cuts piece off löaf.*]

AINGER

Look out. You'll cut your hand. That knife's sharp.

WOODLEY

Well, I didn't imagine it was blunt.

AINGER

What it is, kid? Has Simmy been worrying you?

WOODLEY

Simmy—? Has he said anything?

AINGER

What about?

WOODLEY

Oh, nothing.

AINGER

There's something going on, I know. Can't you tell me? It'll do you good to get it off your chest.

WOODLEY

Oh, go and relieve someone else's chest for a while, and leave me alone, damn you.

AINGER

Oh, very well. If you're going to take it like that, I've got something to say to you.

WOODLEY

Oh, what?

AINGER

Only that if you are going to walk out with shop girls, I shouldn't do it *coram populo,* if I were you. It's dangerous and it's silly.

WOODLEY

What do you mean?

AINGER

I've been waiting to see if you had anything to say before I mentioned it.

WOODLEY

What? What are you driving at?

AINGER

Only that I happened to see you and the girl from Crawley's on the Mallow Road yesterday afternoon.

WOODLEY

Well, why shouldn't you?

AINGER

Oh, no reason at all. Only you were going on hot enough against it yourself the other day.

WOODLEY

I was a young fool the other day.

AINGER

And since then you have learned wisdom? Since Saturday afternoon?

WOODLEY

[*Rising.*] What do you mean by that?

AINGER

Oh, nothing. . . .

WOODLEY

Yes you did. She's been telling you.

AINGER

Telling me what? Look here, kid, for the thousandth time, what's the trouble? What in God's name possessed you to go and do a damn fool thing like that? I didn't say anything, but I could see something was wrong when you didn't get back on Saturday. I was hoping you'd tell me. You always have told me things. You know I wouldn't go back on you.

[WOODLEY *sits chair R. of table.* AINGER *on side of table.*]

I'll do anything I can to help, kid, honest I will, you know that. Tell me, there's a good fellow.

WOODLEY

Oh, God! I've been a fool . . . what a Hell's game life is! You were right. I was with Crawley's girl yesterday afternoon. I went because I didn't care what happened, or who saw me. I met her outside the town and she asked me to go for a walk in the woods.

AINGER

And what happened?

WOODLEY

Can't you guess? Oh, God, I wish I hadn't . . . it was awful . . . awful!

AINGER

What made you—you of all people?

WOODLEY

I tell you I didn't care. . . . I didn't care about anything.

AINGER

But why? What happened to change you like that?

WOODLEY

I can't tell you. . . . I can't. Don't ask me.

AINGER

Has it anything to do with Mrs. Simmy?

WOODLEY

Don't.

AINGER

What was it, boy?

WOODLEY

Swear . . . swear you'll never tell . . . on your oath!

AINGER

I swear.

WOODLEY

Well, then . . . No, I can't—it's no good . . . I can't. Don't ask. I can't tell. You won't tell about yesterday . . . Vining, or any of the others?

AINGER

Of course not.

WOODLEY

It won't happen again . . . ever. I can promise you that. It was horrible—beastly. I feel dirty all over. But it just seemed as though nothing mattered.

AINGER

Don't let it worry you, kid. I wish I could help you.

WOODLEY

Thanks. But you can't. I shall get over it in time, I suppose. Ainger, do you hate me for yesterday . . . like I hated Vining?

AINGER

Of course not.

WOODLEY

I hate myself.

[*A knock.*]

AINGER

Who's there?

[COPE *appears.*]

COPE

Please, Ainger, can I clear away?

WOODLEY

Oh, yes, clear away. [*Crosses to fireplace.*]

AINGER

I'm just going to put up the lists. I'll be back in a minute.

[AINGER *goes.*]

WOODLEY

By the way, Cope, I want to talk to you.

COPE

Yes, Woodley.

WOODLEY

What the Hell do you mean by asking Mrs. Simmons about Riley?

COPE

Mean? I wanted to know what he'd done.

WOODLEY

Didn't you know?

COPE

No, Woodley. No one would tell me. And Vining told me to ask her.

WOODLEY

Vining?

COPE

Yes, Woodley.

WOODLEY

Told you to ask her?

COPE

Yes. Ainger and Milner were here, they'll tell you.

WOODLEY

You little fool, he was only pulling your leg. How could you go and ask a woman a thing like that?

COPE

I didn't know what it was.

WOODLEY

Do you know now?

COPE

Yes, Woodley.

WOODLEY

Did—did Mrs. Simmons tell you?

COPE

No, . . . not properly. Vining told me.

WOODLEY

Vining! Does he know you asked her?

COPE

No, I didn't tell him. I didn't think she'd like me to. He asked me yesterday if I had found out yet . . . and then he told me.

WOODLEY

That's all, Cope. Clear out.

COPE

Yes, Woodley. What about the tea-things?

WOODLEY

Oh, leave them. Come back later.

COPE

Yes, Woodley.

[COPE *goes whistling.* WOODLEY *takes a book and goes to window seat.* VINING *and* MILNER *come in.*]

VINING

Hello, cherub. Isn't Ainger here?

WOODLEY

He'll be back in a minute.

[MILNER *starts gramaphone.*]

Don't put that thing on. Vining, I want to talk to you.

VINING

Always at your service, sweet one.

WOODLEY

Did you tell Cope to ask Mrs. Simmons about Riley?

VINING

I believe I did. Has he asked her?

WOODLEY

Why did you?

VINING

Oh, for a joke. Why, what's the trouble?

WOODLEY

You think it was a joke, do you? I think it was a cad's trick.

VINING

And who asked your opinion?

WOODLEY

No one. I give it to you gratis. I think it was a beastly thing to do.

VINING

Do you now?

WOODLEY

Yes, I do. A filthy, swinish thing. The kid didn't know what he was asking.

VINING

Well, he knows now, anyway.

WOODLEY

Yes, thanks to you and your filthy mind.

VINING

Here!—what's got your goat, Woodley?

[AINGER *comes in.*]

I say, Ainger, Cope has been asking Mrs. Simmy about Riley's offence.

WOODLEY

Yes, and you let Vining put him up to it.

MILNER

How do you know he asked her? Did he tell you?

VINING

Or did *she?*

WOODLEY

Never you mind.

VINING

I didn't know you were on such intimate terms with the Lady Laura as that, Woodley. Have you been playing the young Don Juan at your tête-à-tête teas?

WOODLEY

What do you mean by that?

VINING

Oho! Got him on the raw, have we? And did she virtuously repulse you?

AINGER

Shut up, Vining.

MILNER

Hard luck, Woodley. Try someone more accessible next time. Crawley's girl, for instance.

WOODLEY

What do you mean?

VINING

But don't be discouraged. Remember, "If a lady says 'no' she means 'perhaps,' and if she says 'perhaps' she means 'yes': for if she says 'yes' . . . she's no lady." Try our luscious Laura again. . . . If at first you don't succeed, try, try, again. Remember Bruce and the spider . . .

WOODLEY

[*Livid.*] Shut up, Vining, or I'll kill you.

VINING

What did she say, Woodley. "I would if I could, but I want to be good and I'm not that kind of a girl"? Never mind, it's only done to egg you on to further flights.

WOODLEY

My God! . . .

[*He grabs knife from table and rushes at* VINING, AINGER *seizes* WOODLEY *and holds him back.* VINING *runs to fireplace.*]

AINGER

Woodley, what are you doing?

WOODLEY

Let me get at him . . . !

MILNER

Take care . . . he's got a knife!

AINGER

Woodley!

[SIMMONS *enters.*]

MILNER

Look out!

SIMMONS

And what is the meaning of this, may I ask? What is the significance of the knife and the elaborate tableau?

WOODLEY

I wanted to kill him! I wanted to kill him!

SIMMONS

What does this mean? Was Woodley attacking you, Ainger?

AINGER

No, sir.

SIMMONS

What was it? Tell me, I insist on knowing. Was it Vining?

WOODLEY

Yes. [*He drops knife.*]

SIMMONS

You were attacking Vining with that knife?

WOODLEY

Yes.

SIMMONS

Why, may I ask?

WOODLEY

Oh, what does it matter? You've got what you wanted, haven't you? What you've been waiting for. Here's your opportunity, now expel me and have done with it!

SIMMONS

How dare you speak like that to me, sir.

WOODLEY

Dare? . . . Dare . . . ? [*A fit of shivering seizes him. He clutches at the table for support. Little strangled sounds escape him.*]

SIMMONS

Come, pull yourself together, boy. . . . Don't behave like a hysterical school girl.

WOODLEY

Take me away and have done with it. You've won. Need you bully me now?

SIMMONS

Help me get him into the sick-room, Ainger. I shall want to see you later, all of you. Come, sir. Take his other arm.

[*He tries to take* WOODLEY'S *arm.* WOODLEY *pulls away and goes to the door alone.* SIMMONS *and* AINGER *follow.*]

CURTAIN

SCENE II

SCENE: *Laura's Drawing Room.*

TIME: *The following afternoon. When the curtain rises* LAURA *is at the window. The maid shows in* AINGER *and retires.*

LAURA

Good afternoon. You got my message?

AINGER

Yes. You wanted to see me?

LAURA

Yes. I'm glad you've come.

AINGER

What can I do, Mrs. Simmons?

LAURA

I want to tell you about this trouble with Woodley.

AINGER

What about it?

LAURA

Everything. I only heard of it this afternoon. His father has been sent for, you know. He arrived an hour ago. He is with the Headmaster now. I want to know what it is all about.

AINGER

Has Mr. Simmons not told you?

LAURA

Practically nothing. He was in a hurry.

AINGER

Wouldn't it be better perhaps to wait for him?

LAURA

There's no time. I must know now. I want you to tell me. Sit down, won't you?

[*They sit.*]

Now, please.

AINGER

It's very difficult for me, Mrs. Simmons.

LAURA

I know. But however difficult it is, you must tell me. There are reasons why I must know. You are his friend, that's why I sent for you.

AINGER

Well, he has not been very well, lately, I think. I don't know why . . . depressed and . . . we couldn't get him to talk. And then yesterday, in the Prefects' Room, the others were ragging him, and he lost his temper. They went further than they meant, I think, and . . . I tell you he has not been quite himself . . . he . . . he picked up a knife and went for them.

LAURA

Was anyone hurt?

AINGER

No . . . I stopped him.

LAURA

And then . . . ?

AINGER

And then Mr. Simmons came in. That's all.

LAURA

I see. What were they ragging him about?

AINGER

Please . . . don't ask me that, Mrs. Simmons.

LAURA

I must. I'm sorry, but I must. It must have been something serious to drive him to that. What was it?

AINGER

Really . . . I . . . I can't tell you that.

LAURA

You must . . . whatever it is. You needn't be afraid. What was it?

AINGER

It was about you.

LAURA

What about me?

AINGER

Really, Mrs. Simmons . . . Well . . . about making love to you.

LAURA

About? . . . How did they know?

AINGER

They didn't know. It was only ragging.

LAURA

Does Mr. Simmons know this?

AINGER

No.

LAURA

Did Woodley say nothing?

AINGER

Nothing. I think he would rather you wouldn't tell him.

LAURA

I shan't tell him. Is that all?

AINGER

I think so. Yes.

LAURA

When was this?

AINGER

At tea-time yesterday.

LAURA

Where is he now?

AINGER

In the sick-room. We took him there.

LAURA

He offered no explanation?

AINGER

No. . . . He said something . . . I couldn't quite understand. I didn't think of it at the time . . . but afterwards I wondered . . . about Mr. Simmons having won. I don't know what he meant.

LAURA

I think I do. What does this mean, Ainger? Expulsion?

AINGER

I'm afraid so, yes. Mr. Simmons's idea is that he is dangerous, abnormal. He talked to us afterwards.

LAURA

You did not tell him why it happened?

AINGER

We told him they were ragging him. He did not ask why.

LAURA

No. [*Rising.*] Thank you, Ainger. I'm very grateful indeed to you for having spoken . . . frankly . . . as you have.

AINGER

I don't know whether you'll think it impertinent. . . .

LAURA

Well?

AINGER

There's nothing you could do—or say . . . to save him?

LAURA

Nothing, I'm afraid. You're fond of Woodley, Ainger?

AINGER

Yes, very.

LAURA

He confides in you?

AINGER

Sometimes. But I know nothing of this.

LAURA

But you guess . . . a lot?

AINGER

That's my affair.

LAURA

I'm sorry, Ainger. Have I spoiled your friendship with him?

AINGER

I'm not likely to see him again. I'm leaving in July and going out east at once.

LAURA

I'm sorry.

AINGER

Is there anything else?

LAURA

No. And thank you. And, Ainger . . . please believe . . . I can do nothing. It would only make things worse.

[AINGER *bows.*]

You can go out this way.

AINGER

Thank you.

LAURA

Would you like to see him before he goes?

AINGER

They won't let me.

LAURA

I think I can arrange it, if you'd like to.

AINGER

Oh, yes, I should like to.

LAURA

Well, come back in ten minutes, and wait in the hall. I'll see what I can do.

AINGER

Thank you.

LAURA

Good-bye.

AINGER

Good-bye.

[*He goes. Voices heard off.* LAURA *looks at door L. Goes out R.* SIMMONS *and* MR. WOODLEY *come in L. The latter is a business man of a little over fifty.*]

SIMMONS

Well, there you have it, Mr. Woodley. You've heard the Head's opinion, and . . .

MR. W.

Frankly, Mr. Simmons, I don't understand this. A boy doesn't attack another with a knife for no reason at all.

SIMMONS

Not a normal boy, I agree. That's the whole point.

MR. W.

You've made that remark before. What are you driving at?

SIMMONS

I don't consider your son a normal boy by any means, Mr. Woodley.

MR. W.

I must say this is an extraordinary affair. Has this abnormality you speak of manifested itself in any other ways besides this incident? Are you keeping something from me?

SIMMONS

I have told you all I consider relevant. There have been a large number of things. I am not judging him on this alone, though naturally I regard it as a climax. . . . A boy who has allowed his self-control to get so far out of hand . . .

MR. W.

Yes, yes, yes. I've heard all that, and I say I don't understand it. Roger's not a baby; he must be ac-

customed to teasing by this time. I should be obliged if you would tell me some of the things that you don't consider relevant. Perhaps I might . .

SIMMONS

Really, Mr. Woodley, I should have thought this quite sufficient. But your son's behaviour lately has been far from satisfactory in every respect.

MR. W.

Really, Mr. Simmons, you can hardly consider it unreasonable of me to ask for details. You wire me suddenly to come down here. You tell me that my son has been atacking other boys with a knife because they were teasing him, and that I must remove him at once because he's a danger to the school. You keep saying that he's not normal. Do you mean that he is out of his mind?

SIMMONS

Mr. Woodley, if you choose to deliberately misunderstand me . . .

MR. W.

How can I help it? I've always found Roger a perfectly normal boy. A little shy and diffident, perhaps. What about this large number of things you spoke of? What, for instance?

SIMMONS

Well, for instance, then: his manner lately to me,

and the other masters, has been extremely lacking in respect.

MR. W.

I should hardly call that abnormal, myself. Anything else?

SIMMONS

His behaviour to my wife. . . .

MR. W.

WHAT ABOUT IT?

SIMMONS

It has been . . . most objectionable.

MR. W.

Do you mean he has been ungentlemanly?

SIMMONS

You don't quite understand me, Mr. Woodley.

MR. W.

You don't make it very easy for me to do so. Look here, man. Is there anything behind all this, or isn't there? If you're concealing anything please stop doing so. I'm the boy's father and surely I'm entitled to know what he has done. He's been rude to your wife, is that it?

SIMMONS

No, . . . it's far more than that. I found them here myself the other day. If I hadn't come in when I did, I can't say what might have happened.

MR. W.

Do you mean that he was making love to your wife?

SIMMONS

Well, bluntly . . . yes.

MR. W.

What do you mean exactly by "making love"?

SIMMONS

Well, really, Mr. Woodley . . . it's not exactly a question that I . . .

MR. W.

Do you mean that he was trying to seduce her?

SIMMONS

Well, I . . . I hardly . .

MR. W.

Can't you answer one question simply? "Yes" or "No"?

SIMMONS

Well . . . yes, then.

MR. W.

It is beyond me. As I say, Roger has always seemed to me to be a perfectly ordinary boy, rather quiet and reticent . . . too much so perhaps . . . and now you tell me that he has been attacking people with knives and assaulting your wife. . . .

SIMMONS

I have told you, Mr. Woodley, that I regard him as a dangerous influence . . . subversive. He thinks he's artistic, writes poetry, I know that kind of boy. I have not been a school master for twenty-five years for nothing. Highly dangerous . . .

MR. W.

The headmaster said nothing of this affair of your wife. You told him I presume?

SIMMONS

I—I had not done so. It—it only occurred yesterday, and with this coming on top of it, it seemed . . . well, you can imagine it's scarcely a pleasant matter for me. But he takes the same view of this business as I do, and in the circumstances it seemed hardly necessary . . .

MR. W.

Very well, Mr. Simmons, I'll take the boy away with me. As I say it's utterly beyond my comprehension but . . . I'd better see him and we'll catch the five

o'clock train. You can send his things on afterwards. Where is he now?

SIMMONS

In the sick-room. I'll send him to you. You can see him here.

MR. W.

Thank you, Mr. Simmons.

[SIMMONS *goes out L.* MR. W. *takes out time-table, looks at it, when* LAURA *enters.*]

LAURA

Mr. Woodley . . . !

MR. W.

I beg your pardon. . . .

LAURA

Mr. Woodley, I must speak to you. I don't know what my husband has been telling you. . . .

MR. W.

Eh? . . . Surely . . . are you . . . Mrs. Simmons?

LAURA

Yes. I don't know what he has said, he is capable of saying anything. But I must speak to you now . . . quickly.

MR. W.

What is it?

LAURA

I want to explain . . . as well as I can. . . . All this has been my fault.

MR. W.

Ah!

LAURA

Listen. I was attracted by your son. . . . I . . . I encouraged him, I made him make love to me. My husband found us . . . here.

MR. W.

Go on.

LAURA

I want you to understand that it was my fault . . . all of it. . . . This trouble yesterday—was all due to that. They were teasing him . . . about me . . . about being in love with me. I've treated him very badly, I know. I'm terribly, terribly sorry . . . more than I can say. I'd give anything, anything in the world, to unlive these last three days . . . but I want you to understand that I am to blame. If there is any way in which I can make reparation for what I have done . . .

MR. W.

This is rather different from your husband's story.

LAURA

I daresay.

MR. W.

He gave me to understand that my son had assaulted you.

LAURA

Ha! You needn't believe that. It was I . . . it was iniquitous of me, I know, but I didn't realize what it meant . . . what it must have meant to him. . . . I can never forgive myself.

MR. W.

Wait a moment. I'm beginning to understand . . . a good deal. Tell me, Mrs. Simmons . . . you probably know my son better than your husband does . . . do you consider him abnormal or . . . dangerous?

LAURA

No. He's shy and . . . rather lonely, I think. But he is a charming boy.

MR. W.

So I gather.

LAURA

I know . . . I deserve that you should think hardly of me. I won't attempt to excuse myself. But please . . . don't let it hurt him . . . more than it must. He

must go, now: I understand that, but don't let it hurt him.

MR. W.

I don't quite follow.

LAURA

What will you do with him now?

MR. W.

I really hadn't thought. I suppose in the circumstances, Cambridge is out of the question. . . .

LAURA

He wants sympathy and interest badly.

MR. W.

I know. I'm afraid that is partly my fault. We've never been very intimate, he and I. His mother died when he was quite small and, somehow, we've always been rather shy of each other. Good friends, you know, . . . but . . .

LAURA

Father and son. I understand.

MR. W.

My sister keeps house for me. She's always looked after him but—well, she is unmarried and is not the same thing as a mother.

LAURA

Couldn't you take him away for a bit. Travel with him . . . get to know him.

MR. W.

I'm afraid it would be agony for us both . . . we should both die of shyness.

LAURA

Surely . . . surely you could conquer that, if you cared for him?

MR. W.

As you do, Mrs. Simmons.

LAURA

You're right, I do love him . . . with all my heart. But you needn't be afraid. . . .

MR. W.

I'm not afraid. And . . . I'll do all I can. He'd better come into the business and . . . I'll play golf with him and get to know him as well as is possible for . . . father and son.

LAURA

I think he'll repay you.

MR. W.

I'll do my best.

[*They shake hands.*]

LAURA

Thank you.

[*She goes out R.* SIMMONS *and* WOODLEY *come in L.*]

SIMMONS

Well, I'll leave you together. I shall be in my study, within call, if you want me, Mr. Woodley.

MR. W.

Well, Roger?

WOODLEY

Well?

MR. W.

You know what this means, of course?

WOODLEY

Yes, the sack.

MR. W.

Pretty serious, eh?

WOODLEY

I suppose so.

MR. W.

What am I going to do with you?

WOODLEY

Cut me off with a shilling, I should think. Kick me out. It'll save the trouble in the long run. I've made a mess of things, and . . .

MR. W.

Don't try heroics on with me. They won't wash.

WOODLEY

Well, it's true.

MR. W.

Look here, Roger, have you anything you want to tell me? I realize that there must be more in this than Mr. Simmons' story.

WOODLEY

That's enough, isn't it?

MR. W.

I should like to hear your side.

WOODLEY

I haven't got one.

MR. W.

Well, what do you propose to do now?

WOODLEY

You'd better send me to a Reformatory School, I should think.

MR. W.

Roger, be serious. This isn't a joking matter.

WOODLEY

Everything is a joking matter . . . as far as I can make out.

MR. W.

Roger, won't you tell me what is the matter?

WOODLEY

God only knows. Life. Or me, or both.

MR. W.

You don't feel like being more explicit?

WOODLEY

Father, you've heard Simmons' story. I admit . . . every word of it. Isn't that enough?

MR. W.

I should like to understand, Roger.

WOODLEY

I went for them both with a knife. That's all. They were ragging me and I lost my temper, and I'm a danger to the place.

MR. W.

What were they ragging you about?

WOODLEY

Never mind. It doesn't matter.

MR. W.

Surely . . . ?

WOODLEY

Oh, nothing. Just ragging.

MR. W.

Roger, I have been talking to Mrs. Simmons.

WOODLEY

Well, she doesn't know.

MR. W.

Yes, she does. She told me.

WOODLEY

How could she? Who told her? Did . . . oh!

MR. W.

Roger, she told me a lot of things.

WOODLEY

Father, don't! Please drop it! I'm being sacked—isn't that enough?

MR. W.

I should like to understand your point of view, Roger.

WOODLEY

No. I've been a fool. That's all there is to it. Don't make me talk about it.

MR. W.

Very well. I'm afraid Cambridge is out of the question. You understand that?

WOODLEY

I suppose so.

MR. W.

Would you care to come into the business at once?

WOODLEY

Yes, if you like. Anything. . . . It doesn't matter.

MR. W.

You have no preference of your own?

WOODLEY

No.

MR. W.

Would you care to go away for a holiday first?

WOODLEY

No . . . no . . . I'll come into the business if you'll have me. The sooner the better, I should think.

MR. W.

Very well, Roger.

WOODLEY

Hadn't we better be going? I don't want to take a last long farewell or go and weep in the chapel or anything like that. It's not exactly how I'd planned my departure but . . . is there anything to wait for?

MR. W.

I don't think so. Mrs. Simmons would like to say good-bye to you.

WOODLEY

No. . . . No!

MR. W.

Why not, Roger?

WOODLEY

Let's get away. I hate scenes.

MR. W.

You ought to say good-bye to her.

WOODLEY

No—I'm in disgrace.

MR. W.

Not with her.

WOODLEY

Father, don't. Let's get away. I can't stand this place now.

MR. W.

Very well. I'll go and tell Mr. Simmons.

[*Exit* MR. W. AINGER *appears at window.*]

WOODLEY

Ainger!

AINGER

Yes.

WOODLEY

How did you know I was here?

AINGER

Mrs. Simmons told me, I've been waiting outside.

WOODLEY

Mrs. Simmons! Ainger . . . did you tell her . . . what it was all about?

AINGER

Yes.

WOODLEY

How could you? It was caddish.

AINGER

She made me. I think she rather guessed.

WOODLEY

Oh, well, I don't suppose it matters much, one way or the other.

AINGER

I can't tell you, kid, how sorry I am about it all. There was nothing I could do. I couldn't tell Simmy.

WOODLEY

Well, it doesn't matter.

AINGER

I'll see Vining though. Don't take it too hard, old man. It's rotten, I know, but you've nothing to be ashamed of.

WOODLEY

Haven't I? Look here, you'd better clear, Simmy will be back in a minute. Good-bye.

AINGER

You might drop a line sometime.

WOODLEY

Right you are. Good-bye.

AINGER

Good-bye.

[*They shake hands.* AINGER *exits through window.* LAURA *enters R. and stands in doorway.* WOODLEY *stares out of window.*]

LAURA

Roger, there are some things I want to say to you. Will you listen?

WOODLEY

If you want me to.

[LAURA *crosses down R. and sits on settee.*]

LAURA

Roger, I want to say how sorry I am for everything.

WOODLEY

That's all right.

LAURA

I know why this happened. . . .

WOODLEY

Please don't . . .

LAURA

I must. Roger, do you hate me terribly?

WOODLEY

No.

LAURA

I didn't mean those things I said when you came back the other afternoon.

[WOODLEY *turns to her bitterly.*]

WOODLEY

You needn't go back on them now, because I'm going.

LAURA

I must. I want you to know the truth. Won't you come and sit down?

WOODLEY

Is there any need?

LAURA

Please.

[WOODLEY *comes and sits down.*]

Roger, those things, I had to say them. They weren't true. I want you to think kindly of me if you can, Roger. It was a mistake, a ghastly mistake. I should never have let you tell me what you felt. I should never have shown you that I cared. But I did, Roger, I still care. Only . . . It can't be, that's all.

WOODLEY

Why did you . . . say those things?

LAURA

I had to, Roger, to save you. I know they hurt. They hurt me, too. It tore my heart to say them, but I had to.

WOODLEY

No.

LAURA

I know you love me, Roger, as I love you. That love is a precious thing . . . too precious to hold. I don't want it to turn to gall inside you. I want you to treasure the memory if you can, as I shall—always.

WOODLEY

Laura!

LAURA

We shan't meet again . . . ever, I expect. But I want you to remember . . . gladly, if you can.

WOODLEY

Gladly!

LAURA

Yes—gladly. You're young . . . you have the world before you. I want you to be happy. Don't let me be a bitterness and a reproach to you always . . . don't let me spoil love for you. It's the most precious thing in the world . . . but it is so often wasted and it can be so cruel, it can turn so easily to hate and beastliness. Don't let me feel that I've done that for you.

WOODLEY

Never . . . Laura, never. I swear it.

[LAURA *takes his hand.*]

LAURA

I have loved you, Roger—with all my heart. I

want you to know that and remember it, that's all. [*She rises.*] Now, say good-bye to me.

[*He rises.*]

WOODLEY

Laura . . . you're all the world . . . I can't . . . [*He takes her in his arms.*]

LAURA

Roger . . . dearest boy . . . you must be brave. Don't make it harder for me. [*With an effort he raises his head.*] Good-bye and God bless you always.

[*She kisses his forehead gently and then goes out L.* WOODLEY *falls on settee and breaks down. There is a knock on the door.* WOODLEY *pulls himself together.*]

WOODLEY

Come in.

[MR. W. *comes in. He puts his arm round the boy's shoulder and smiles at him.*]

MR. W.

Are you ready, Roger?

WOODLEY

Quite ready.

[*They exit.*]

CURTAIN

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